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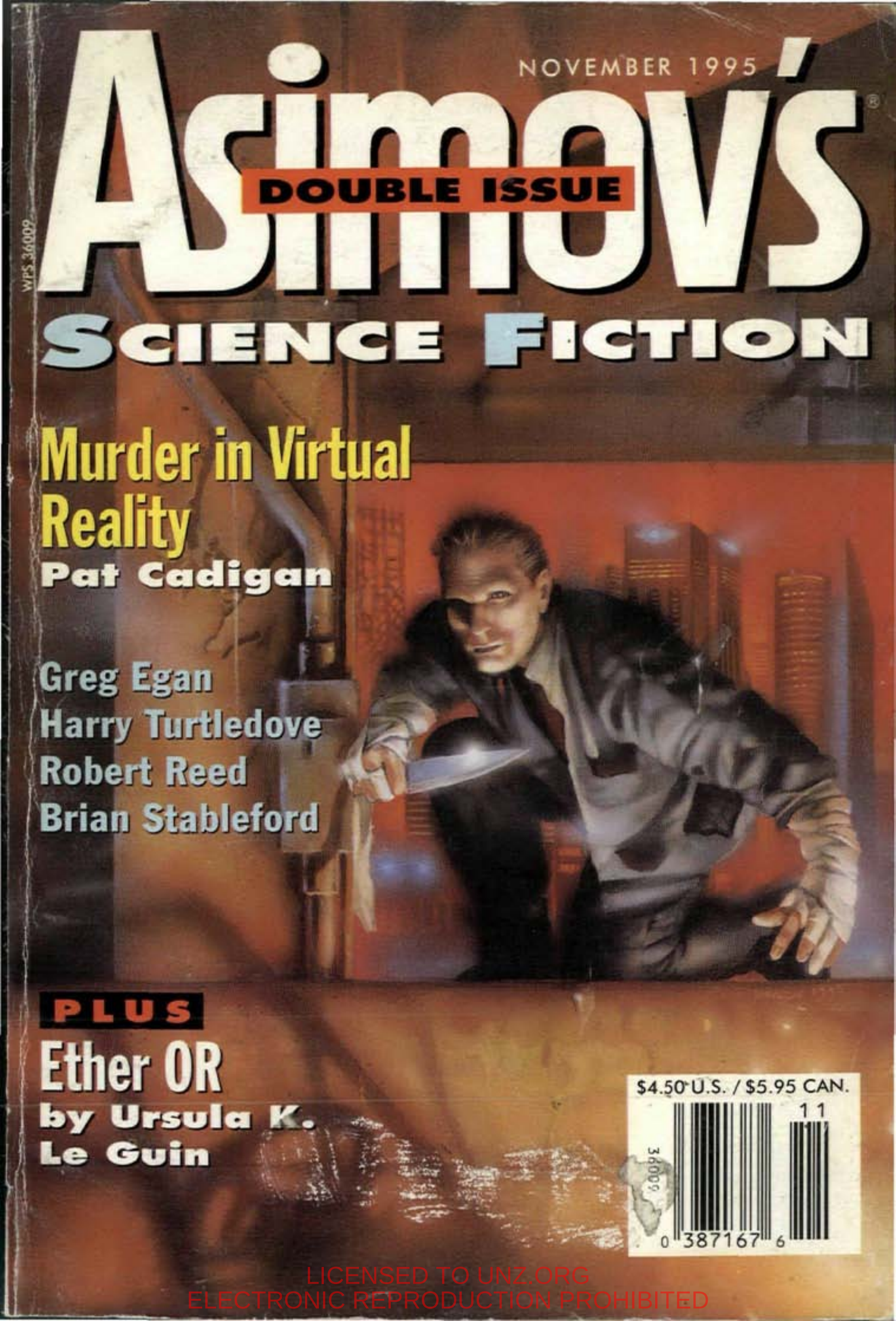

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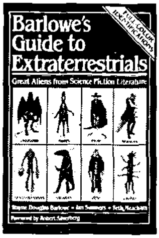
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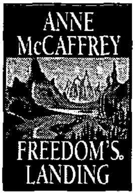
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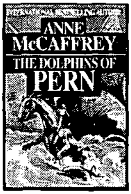
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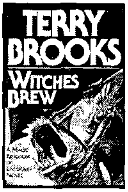
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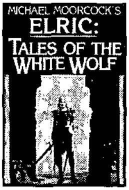
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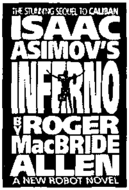
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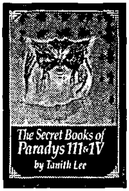
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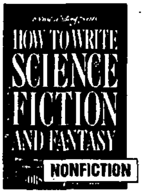
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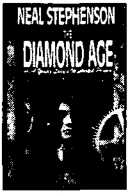
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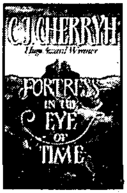
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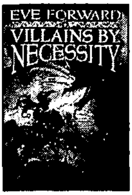
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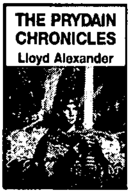
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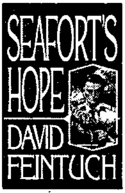
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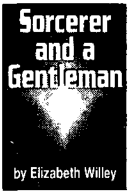
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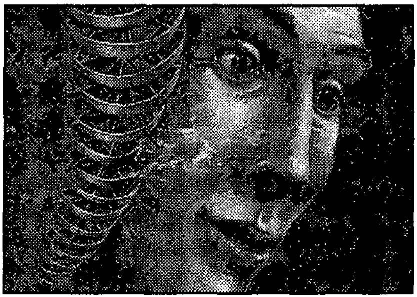

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by Robert Silverberg

THE POWER OF WORDS

W*arning:* The material that follows contains words formerly considered to be unprintable. This column is rated X, or U, or PG, or something like that.

"Oh, shoot!" the little old lady cried, as she dropped one of the many parcels she was carrying. Gentleman of the old school that I am, I picked it up and handed it back to her.

"Oh, shoot!" the five-year-old boy in the park yelled, a couple of minutes later, as his San Francisco 49ers cap went sailing away in the autumn breeze. Somebody else's mother caught it as it rolled past her, dusted it off, and handed it back to him.

These two individuals of very different demographic groups would probably be surprised to learn that they were committing the act of *euphemism* in public, but that's exactly what they were doing. The little old lady may or may not have been aware—probably she was—that what she was really exclaiming was "Oh, shit!" in a form considered appropriate, once upon a time, for well-bred Americans, "shit" as an interjection being an expression of annoyance or disappointment, and "shoot" being the sanitized version of that disagreeable word. The five-year-old boy, most likely, had no idea that what he was saying had any meaning whatever, other than as a way to indicate annoyance, and he was not yet old enough to realize that a simple change of vowel would transform his innocent "Oh, shoot!" into something more bothersome to adult ears. Give him another year for that, I figure.

What power a single letter has! A harmless word can be rendered potent with the tiniest of shifts!

I came late to my understanding of "Oh, shoot!" because I grew up in New York City, a place where even fifty-odd years ago such nice-nelly euphemisms were looked upon as quaint, or, to be more accurate, contemptible. It wasn't until I had begun to mingle with well-bred folk from places like Illinois and Wisconsin and Ohio that I learned about that phrase, and even then I thought at first that it was just some curious regional mispronunciation.

I found out about a different single-letter euphemism during my very short career as a writer of Western stories for a pulp magazine called *Western Action* in 1956.

I was so injudicious as to have a sheriff refer to the recently apprehended villain as "this here bastard." To my surprise it came out in print as "this here *bustard.*"

A bustard is a large, impressive game bird related to the crane. A bastard is a child born out of wedlock. Puzzled by the change, I asked my editor, the amiable, scholarly Robert W. Lowndes, about it. He reminded me that *Western Action* and its sister pulp magazines were part of a large group of publications of which the best known and most profitable was *Archie Comics*. The readership of *Archie* was very young; and the publisher didn't want to offend the mothers of his readers by arousing the suspicion in them that he was publishing smut on the side. So vile words like "bastard" had to be replaced by "bustard" in the Western pulps to protect the integrity of the big moneymaker.

Is anyone fooled by these little changes? Of course not. Then why bother to make them? Because words are magical; words have incantatory power; and, as any practicing magician knows, it is necessary to get the incantation *absolutely right* if you want it to work. An error in a single syllable, nay, a single letter, will result in a nullification of the spell or even a completely unintended (and usually catastrophic) result.

So the nice old lady knows that no one will look askance at her for saying "Oh, shoot," but she'd certainly raise eyebrows if she used the underlying incantation instead. The publisher of *Archie*

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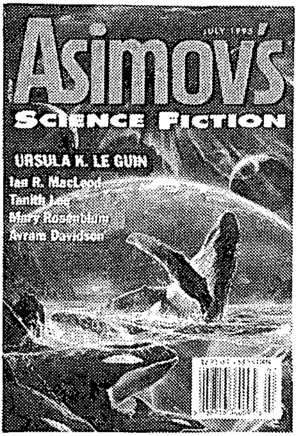
knew he was safe from outraged mothers if he shunned the horrifying "bastard" in favor of the virtually identical, but incomprehensible, "bustard." And so on. Our popular speech is full of such stuff. "Darn," "goldarn," "heck," "gee whiz," "holy gee," and "doggone" all came into being as expletives that skirted the powerful mojo contained in such words as "damn," "God damn," "hell," "Jesus," "Holy Jesus," and, apparently, "Dog on it." "Son of a gun!" or "S.O.B." soften the ferocious impact of "Son of a bitch!" Et cetera.

Of course, things are much rougher these days, languagewise, and new euphemisms have come into use as new unprintables get closer to print. "Asshole" is still considered to be something of a dangerous word, and until recently it never made it into newspapers and popular magazines even in expurgated form. But lately I've begun seeing it in the papers in the form of "a--hole," which looks as odd to me as "bustard," and which in no serious way conceals the underlying vulgarism. The a--hole is the part of the body that the shoot comes out of, I guess. (The cognate word "butthole" doesn't seem to be unprintable at all—there's some sort of, ah, musical group around here called the Butthole Surfers who get their unlikely and, I would think, obscene name in the paper all the time, and then, too, we have Beavis and Butthead, who have failed to attain the obscurity that they really ought to have.)

A curious use of hyphenated purification turned up in my local newspaper, the San Francisco *Chronicle,* in 1973, when a lengthy and abstruse French movie called "The Mother and the Whore" played here. San Francisco in the 1970s, as you may have heard, was not exactly as chaste as Dubuque, but nevertheless our delicate newspaper persisted in forcing the theater advertising this movie to refer to it, bewilderingly, as "The Mother and the W----." I suppose that if the local university had been doing a production of John Ford's classic seventeenth-century play, " 'Tis Pity She's A Whore," it would have had the same treatment. (I've always regarded "whore" as rather a tony sort of word. In the schoolyards of Brooklyn when I was a boy we pronounced that word "hooer," and *hooer* has ever since seemed to me quite a shocking item, whereas *whore* is elegant, posh, the preferred drawing-room version of the term.)

Taboos, of course, come and go. As recently as 1948 Norman Mailer found it necessary to spell the familiar term for copulation as "fug" in his novel of World War II, *The Naked and the Dead.* A few years later James Jones, in *his* war novel, *From Here to Eternity,* was able to use the full four-letter form in all its awesome immensity. "Fuck" still isn't widely seen in newspaper copy, but it's pretty doggone ubiquitous everywhere else and whatever shock value it once had is goldarn well eroded by now. (Though I was startled to see, in



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Paris a couple of years ago, posters everywhere promoting a movie called "Fucking Bernard." The word is foreign to the French and not taboo there, but it was odd to see it all around town in letters a foot high, all the same. The movie will need some other title, I suspect, if it ever plays here, unless things are changing even faster than it currently seems.)

The magical powers of the "unprintable" words has long been fascinating to me. A quarter of a century ago I examined some of our little inconsistencies of usage in my novel *The World Inside*, which takes place in the year 2381, and in which a young historian ponders the oddities of our era, and particularly the restrictions that twentieth-century people placed on words, in this passage:

"A phrase leaps out of a supposedly serious twentieth-century work of social criticism: 'Among the most significant developments of the decade was the attainment of the freedom, at last, for the responsible writer to use such words as *fuck* and *cunt* where necessary in his work.' Can that have been so? Such importance placed on mere words? Jason pronounces the odd monosyllables aloud in his research cubicle: 'Fuck. Cunt. Fuck. Cunt. Fuck.' They sound merely antiquated. Harmless, certainly. He tries the modern equivalents. 'Top. Slot. Top. Slot. Top.' No impact. How can words ever have held such inflammatory content that an apparently penetrating scholar would feel it worthwhile to celebrate their free public use? Jason is aware of his limitations as a historian when he runs into such things. He simply cannot comprehend the twentieth century's obsession with words. To insist on giving God a capital letter, as though He might be displeased to be called god! To suppress books for printing words like c--t and f--k and s--t!"

That novel of mine was serialized in *Galaxy,* one of the leading SF magazines of the era, and the passage I have just quoted was printed without editorial objection, four-letter words and all, in the July 1970 issue. Evidently my twenty-fourth-century historian's ruminations on the harmlessness of our ancient obscenities caused some static among the readership, though, because just a few months later *Galaxy* ran Robert A. Heinlein's novel *I Will Fear No Evil,* in which Heinlein, then sixty-three years old, allowed himself for the first time in his life to use a few of the formerly unprintable words right at the end of his book. The passage in question was a joyous and grateful hymn to the pleasures of love, and this is precisely how it appeared in the December 1970 issue of *Galaxy,* only five months after my own meditation on verbal censorship:

"Thank you, Roberto, for letting me welcome you into my body. It is good to touch—to f---, be f---ed."

Which is to be f---ed indeed. Oh, shoot, I thought, reading that in 1970: we have lost the battle already. But in fact the battle goes on and on, as taboos come and go. I'm not entirely sure which side I'm on myself anymore, as former vile obscenities bubble on the lips of darling babes. I know how idiotic the verbal taboos are, and yet I am starting to regret the coarsening of taste that has come with our liberation almost as much as I would regret (and oppose!) an attempt to compel us to return to the hecks and goldarns and shoots of yesteryear. A complicated subject, by cracky! More on it later, I think. ●

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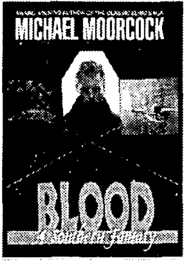

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LETTERS

Dear Michael Swanwick,

I've just read your article "In the Tradition . . ." in *Asimov's Science Fiction,* and I want to thank you for drawing my attention to some new and wonderful writers of fantasy. Thanks, in particular, for Greer Ilene Gilman's *Moonwise*. Gilman has to be the finest stylist working in the fantasy field today. (I only wish there were more competition, but that's another story.)

In return, may I suggest an author for you to read? Lisa Goldstein has written some terrific books. *Tourists* is great magical realism—her strength here is the way she presents the magical and marvelous as commonplace, and vice versa. Though you left historical fantasy out of your survey you might try *Strange Devices of the Sun and Moon,* in which the fantastic breaks through into Elizabethan London. *Summer King Winter Fool* is more traditional fantasy, with gods and foppish courtiers and ancient ruins and poet-mages and astronomer-priests and an absolutely believable invented religion.

Thanks,

Alison Hough

I agree absolutely. Lisa Goldstein's most remarkable work, though, remains The Red Magician *not because it won the American Book Award for 1982 (although that's remarkable enough) but because it's a fantasy novel set in the Holocaust. I read it with dread and skepticism, convinced that Goldstein couldn't possibly pull it off, not without trivializing the Holocaust or fantasy itself or both. But she did, and for once it was a pleasure to be proved wrong. And while we're on the subject of authors inexplicably left out of my essay, allow me to recommend Rachel Pollack, whose* Temporary Agency *is set in a contemporary America run by shamanistic magic, where the only protection a citizen has from the meddling of Malign Ones is the Spiritual Development Agency, a bureau of the Federal government. A gonzo idea developed with brio and clarity. Simply amazing.*

All best,

—Michael Swanwick

Mr. Silverberg,

Being an avid reader of science fiction for more than twenty years, I can't help but agree with almost every point you brought up in your editorials about Gresham's Law. In my search for good new SF I often find myself boggled by the endless expanses of useless fluff at bookstores. A number of thoughts come to mind on the subject.

First, I find myself falling back on the authors I know and love (Cherryh, Silverberg, Tepper, Wolfe, et al.), perhaps missing out on something good by a new writer. Slim odds perhaps, but I think about it sometimes.

Second, I end up scrounging around for used copies of good things from past decades now out of print. While the prices certainly suit my budget, the supply is less than reliable, and it bothers me that authors will realize no gain from my buying. When I buy a new book, I'm sending a message to the publisher: Somebody likes this one. But publishers have no way of knowing what used books are selling.

Third, a little hope. There are publishers who seem to keep the quality level pretty high, and even publish past worthies. Bantam Spectra comes to mind. I hope they're doing well enough to keep up their standards and stay in business.

Fourth, another ray of hope. As long as there are consistent outlets for good SF (like *Asimov's* and *Omni*), some potential readers might get steered in the right direction.

Fifth, an observation. The same thing happens in other fields. For example, in popular music up until about the mid '70s, record labels put out large quantities of diverse music, hoping to get a hit here and there to pay the bills. Then came the era of multi-platinum megasellers, and the business changed, placing a bigger emphasis on formulaic, low-risk propositions, edging out artists with respectable but not spectacular sales. I'm simplifying a bit, but my point remains valid.

Sixth, a prediction. In popular music, the advent of the compact disc has served to increase the availability of obscure items from the past. Small specialty labels cheaply buy the rights to things the major labels don't feel they can make a profit on. With smaller overhead a small label can survive catering to a smaller audience. Much as I love books, perhaps a new medium will have the same effect in SF.

Seventh, another observation. As a budding SF writer myself, one who aspires to the more artistic part of the field, I can't help feeling the temptation to write a *Star Trek* novel or a *Terminator* rip-off just to get published. Who knows how many of the writers producing such things might be true lovers of classic SF paying the bills by supplying the demand?

As long as those of us who are knowledgeable about what is best in the field can pass on that information to new readers, there is reason for optimism that SF won't be completely dragged under by another Glibabibion series. Keep up the good work—I'll do my part.

Sincerely,

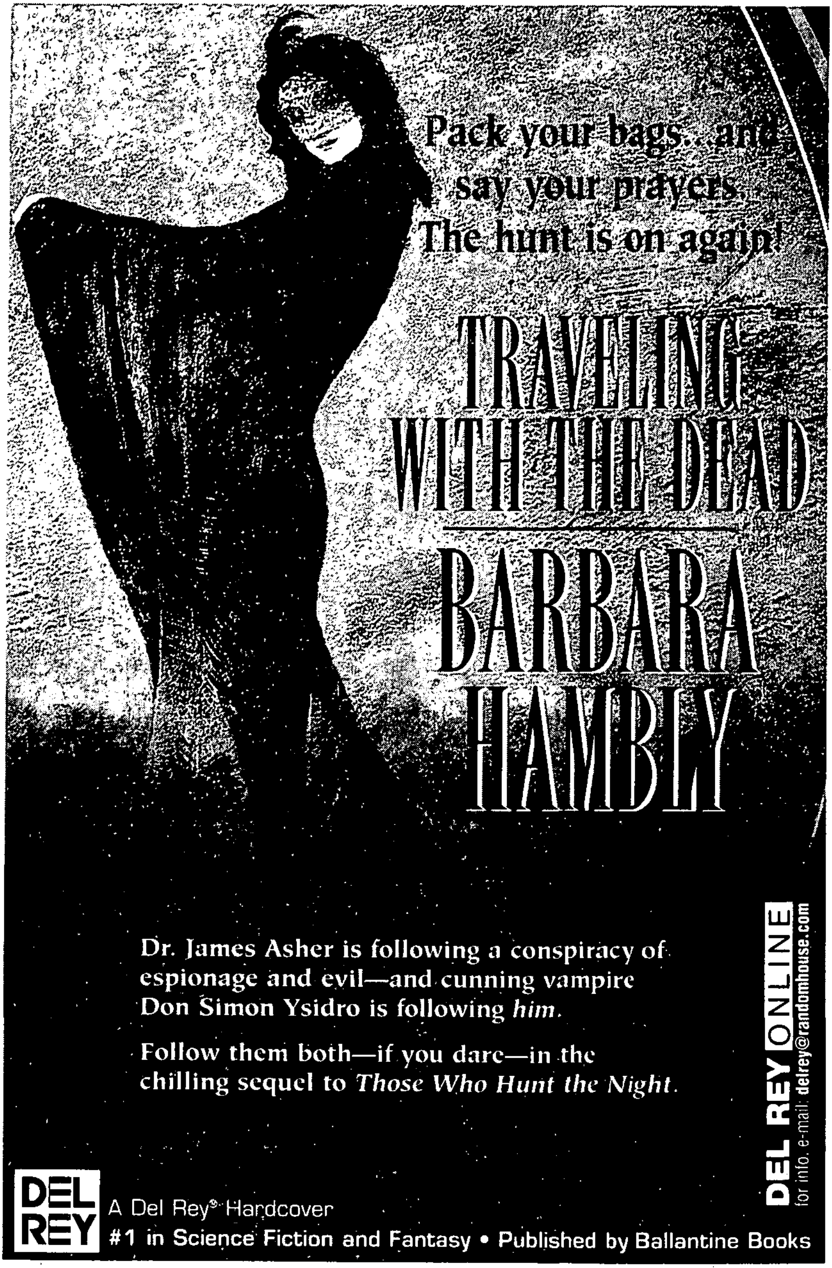
Jon Leslie Davis
from the Internet

Dear Mr. Silverberg & Mr. Spinrad,

I'm writing in response to the February and March installments of the "Reflections" column and the April installment of the "On Books" column. It appears to me from what I read that most of the problems in current SF trends you've described stem from the methods employed by the publishing industry and would not exist if the publishing was in an electronic dial-up & download format. The biggest problem I see preventing this type of publishing is that no one has yet made it as affordable, convenient, and pleasurable to read downloaded materials as it is to read books. However, I get hope from hearing of technology outstripping society's ability to keep up with it on most every other front that it will outstrip the current publishing industry's ability to destroy SF as well.

I would estimate that within three years, a machine that can (1) be held & read like a book, (2) dial up and download information, (3) record information on removable media, and (4) do lots of other stuff less important to buying stories over the phone will be inexpensive enough that at least as many people as read *Asimov's* will own one. By the time such a thing costs as little as a GameBoy™ but can be sold as being educational as well, lots & lots of people will own one.

Almost anyone at all could have their material published, with the publisher charging two dollars a month or so for the disk space allowing their material to be available. Of course, this would entail authors working out their own separate arrangements with editors. Since nothing would ever be out of print, and everyone would have access to everything on the market, readers having to choose from such a bewildering array would be more likely to base purchasing decisions on reviews than they are now. This ought to bring an increase in quality to the material actually sold. If authors make only 30 cents a copy on novel length material now, stories could easily be sold for 50 cents each with the publisher taking a nickel, increasing the author's take by 150 percent. Among the things less expensive than $5 books but more expensive than $.50 stories are: a beer, a bunch of grapes, an extra value meal at your local fast food distributor, one of those really big candy bars, a can of soup, a roll of film, two USPS first class postage stamps, a light bulb, a candle, a package of toilet paper, a small bottle of aspirin, a tube of toothpaste, a box of condoms, a videocassette rental. So stories might even become a more popular form of entertainment. SF has a distinct market advantage over other types of fiction here in that a greater percentage of its readers are predisposed to integrating such new technology into their daily lives. Many SF stories are already published electronically, even though you have to sit up in front of a monitor to read them. I kind of wonder what will happen when there are more really good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John Harry Banister
from the Internet

Dear Gardner,

I got through reading Norman Spinrad's review column, wherein he wonders why SF books of a certain literary character have a tough time in the American market, and sounds so surprised that there are not enough readers to make such a book cost-effective as a publishing project. Having some experience trying to sell the eccentric and "difficult" into the SF market, I thought I might be able to shed some light on this problem.

I'll start with a couple of examples from my own catalog, R.A. Lafferty and David Bunch. Now, in publishing these authors in "trade" paperback and hardcover editions, I've been able to sell about seven to eight hundred copies of each title. Which is not bad for books that seem to some a little on the expensive side, have very limited distribution and almost no promotion. Lafferty and Bunch employ highly individual and eccentric prose styles, but I would not personally consider them to be very "difficult." In fact, the readership level necessary to read and enjoy these books is not really much greater than what's necessary to read, say, the Avram Davidson story that appears a few pages before Spinrad's essay. I mean, we're not talking Joycean levels of difficulty here.

Selling this many copies means I can pay the printer and maybe a little royalty to the author, and not much else. Does this mean I could sell more copies with greater distribution? Maybe, if I was very careful about it. It would almost certainly mean a higher level of returns (though at least with trade books I get whole copies, mass-market returns are 100 percent wasted paper), which can be a big cost if the number of unsold copies is very large (come look in my basement if you don't believe me). Could I sell more copies if I advertised more? Yes, but the cost, again, would be prohibitive. For example, I once spent $900 to advertise these books in *F&SF*, a magazine with a paid circulation of 55,000 allegedly intelligent readers, where in fact once upon a time Lafferty and Bunch did appear with some frequency. This ad sold about $300 worth of books. Since a few of the respondents were buying more than one book, it came out to about a .03 percent response. If I got a similar response rate on a direct mail campaign, I would have to spend about $30,000,000 to sell 15,000 copies. The problem is not so much that the readers aren't out there, but that they're spread extremely thin, so reaching them just isn't cost effective. The bell curve Spinrad talks about is a very steep one, especially for SF.

And that's only part of the reason why a publisher would turn down a "difficult" book. As to why readers reject them so readily, that's something that can't really be answered in the space of a letter, if at all. The vast bulk of commercial (i.e., published for potential profit) SF is more or less directly descended from the Campbellian plodding prose tradition (motto: "We've got no aesthetic sense, and we're proud of it, man!") that results in a mess of basically indistinguishable books and writers. Whereas many of the truly great writers of our field have styles that are immediately recognizable and distinct. If you were to do a blind reading of Lafferty, or Bunch, or Tiptree, or Emshwiller, or Wolfe, or Ballard, for example, there would be no confusing them. So when the average SF reader encounters this sort of thing, what's the response? Is it a signal to the reader that the book will be "difficult" (in most cases, merely for being unfamiliar), or perhaps of that "depressing literary" kind of SF that doesn't highlight the Triumph of the Scientific Will? That's an unfortunate bias that many SF readers have, and in many cases is just plain untrue. It's akin to the belief in the literary world that "if it's SF, it can't be good, and if it's good, it can't be SF."

Whatever all the reasons are, the genre as a whole loses. Readers who would like to see more challenging books are going to be continually dissatisfied with what the publishers offer them, and many of our more talented writers will not be encouraged to take any real chances with their writing. That's the road to stagnation and slow death.

Feed Your Head,

Bryan Cholfin
Broken Mirrors Press, Inc.
P.O. Box 380473
Cambridge, MA 02238

Dear Mr. Dozois,

Since I've been pretty merciless in the past writing to you about things I did not like in the magazine, it seems only fair to write and compliment you when there is something I think was good!

In the May issue, the poem by William John Watkins, "The Old Astronaut Sings to the Mourning Star" was SO GOOD that it made my hair stand on end. Please relay my highest compliments to the poet.

I really enjoy Robert Silverberg's editorials and sometimes find them the high point of the magazine if I did not like the stories.

And I'm looking forward to the results from Janet Asimov's message in which she asks for "more upbeat" stories. The "Trout Fishing" story, in the March issue, was, I hope, a harbinger of what is to come!

Yours truly,

Pierre Mihok
Don Mills, ON

Dear Mr. Silverberg:

Your editorial in the May issue of *Asimov's,* "Gold Doesn't Smell," both disappointed and angered me. While the final topic of alien hygiene was interesting, it is because of two points made on the way that

I'm writing.

It is nice you were able to take advantage of a public loo when on vacation in Europe. I have to agree something like that would be a convenience just about anywhere. It's when you mention handicap accessibility laws as a "troublesome fact" and a snag to their installation that I feel my hackles raise. While you would not deny the right of wheelchair bound people to toilet facilities I wonder if you realize they are denied that right rather routinely. Older buildings are often exempted from having to modify existing facilities for a number of reasons. Unfortunately, even when modifications *are* made they are often faulty, making it impossible for a person to use the new "handicap accessible" stall without the active assistance of another person, causing a lack of privacy that most people also feel they have a right to.

The other point you made in your argument to have public toilets installed in the U.S. is their need because of the stink caused by the homeless. (Please remember that single mothers and their children are the fastest growing segment of the homeless and I doubt if they are on the streets because they want to be there.) Remember when you used the public privy in France it did require the cost of a franc or two to get inside. Do you honestly believe that someone who is reduced to living on the streets is going to have the coinage needed to use such a facility? Even if they did have it I think it far more likely said coinage would be spent on food rather than elimination. In all, I don't see how you can be naïve enough to believe that public privies would benefit the homeless.

Two things you might give thought to. With modern medicine saving the lives of many accident victims who would have died otherwise, the number of handicapped individuals in our population is going to continue to rise. Also, with congress saying that welfare payments will be limited to two years, and the federal economy demanding a 6 percent unemployment level (if it drops below that figure they raise the prime), adding in the impossibility of raising a family on what McDonald's pays, I think you can expect to see the number of homeless rise as well.

"Marie, the peasants have no bread to eat."

"Let them shit cake."

Christine La Borge
Mt. Pleasant, MI

The pursuit of ideal perfection has led this country into some unhappy compromises of late. I don't agree that disabled people have any "right" to public toilet facilities, any more than non-disabled people do, but I think it would be a good idea if such facilities existed in our cities. Alas, there doesn't seem to be any practicable way to manufacture a street facility that will both be large enough to accommodate a wheelchair and small enough to allow for pedestrian traffic on that street. So—in the interest of equal

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"rights" for the disabled—no facilities at all get built, and the disabled and the healthy alike have no place to find relief. There's abstract justice in this, sure, but the fundamental problem of making public toilet facilities available nevertheless remains unsolved.

I agree with you that homeless people would be more likely to spend their money on food (or drink, or drugs) than in pay toilets. But public toilets, automated or not, don't necessarily have to charge admission fees. If we're going to have a substantial percentage of our population living on the streets, and apparently we are, then it would be a good idea to provide some sort of free public sanitary accommodations for them, not because street people have any "right" to such a thing, but simply because it's a good idea.

—Robert Silverberg

Dear *Asimov's*,

I've been a subscriber a long time, about twelve years. I really like your new format for the Next Issue section as I see it in the new May 1995 issue. Excellent. I can hardly wait to see the new Landis story "Across the Darkness"!

Any new Greg Egan in the near future?

Sincerely,

Ken Papai
San Rafael, CA

Thanks for the compliment. You'll find a new Greg Egan story, "Tap," on page 100.

—Sheila Williams

Dear Mr. Dozois,

First let me say that I have been a fan of *Asimov's Science Fiction* magazine since that fateful day in 1977 when, as a substitute resident advisor in a group home I was searching for something to read and picked up the magazine that had come in for the regular resident advisor. It has been my mainstay throughout all these years—often being the only fiction I read during times when my workload causes me to cut back my enjoyment reading to the bare minimum.

I've never failed to be totally enamored of many, and often all, stories within its pages each month. I look forward to the day that the magazine arrives on my doorstep, and often read it cover to cover immediately (still—even after almost two decades!). I've recently shared my entire collection (I have every issue since 1978) with a family member so that she, too, can enjoy the many years worth of stories.

Once again, thank you for providing me with such enjoyment over the years.

Christine J. Rhoads
Reading, PA

Dear Mr. Dozois,

This is just a quick note to let you know how much I enjoyed reading "Thorri the Poet's Saga" by S. N. Dyer and Lucy Kemnitzer. It's a fine addition to the shelf of such works as *Hrolf Kraki's Saga* by Poul Anderson and *Gerpla* (translated under the not so happy title of *The Happy Warriors*) by Halldor Laxness. Thanks! for the opportunity to read this decidedly "off-trail" story!

Sincerely,

Michael D. Toman
South Pasadena, CA

Dear Editors,

I just finished reading "Thorri the Poet's Saga," in the June 1995 issue of *Asimov's*. Every aspect of the story was masterfully done. The depiction of old Norse culture was careful and thorough, but the authors were still able to present a lively and well-paced story. The two principal characters, Njal Thorgeirsson and Gunnar of Hildarend, were both shrewd and interesting. Njal the lawyer's second sight of the future helped provide some interesting moments of foreshadowing, and even the minor characters such as Jorunn the chieftan's wife were well-realized. I hope that we may see more of Ms. Dyer and Ms. Kemnitzer's work in future issues, and perhaps even another story with these same characters. Keep up the good work!

Chris Brown
from the Internet

Dear Mr. Silverberg,

Just a line to let you know that your editorial in the June issue made my morning, not only because of the title reference (I wonder how many people actually know that song!) but because I too have the Magnum Opus Novel dream, and I haven't even tried to publish yet. So take heart!

Jezebel
from the Internet

Dear Editors,

I've read *Asimov's* from its inception and there have been a lot of great stories, but I feel compelled to write, for the first time, in regards to one of them, "Drifting Off the Coast of New Mexico" by Steven Boyett—which appeared in the June 1995 issue.

More!!! Please!! And soon!!!

If possible, give us some bio on this author! I've put the name on my "watch for works by" short list on the basis of this one story alone!!

BRAVO!!!!!!!

Bob Weeks
from the Internet

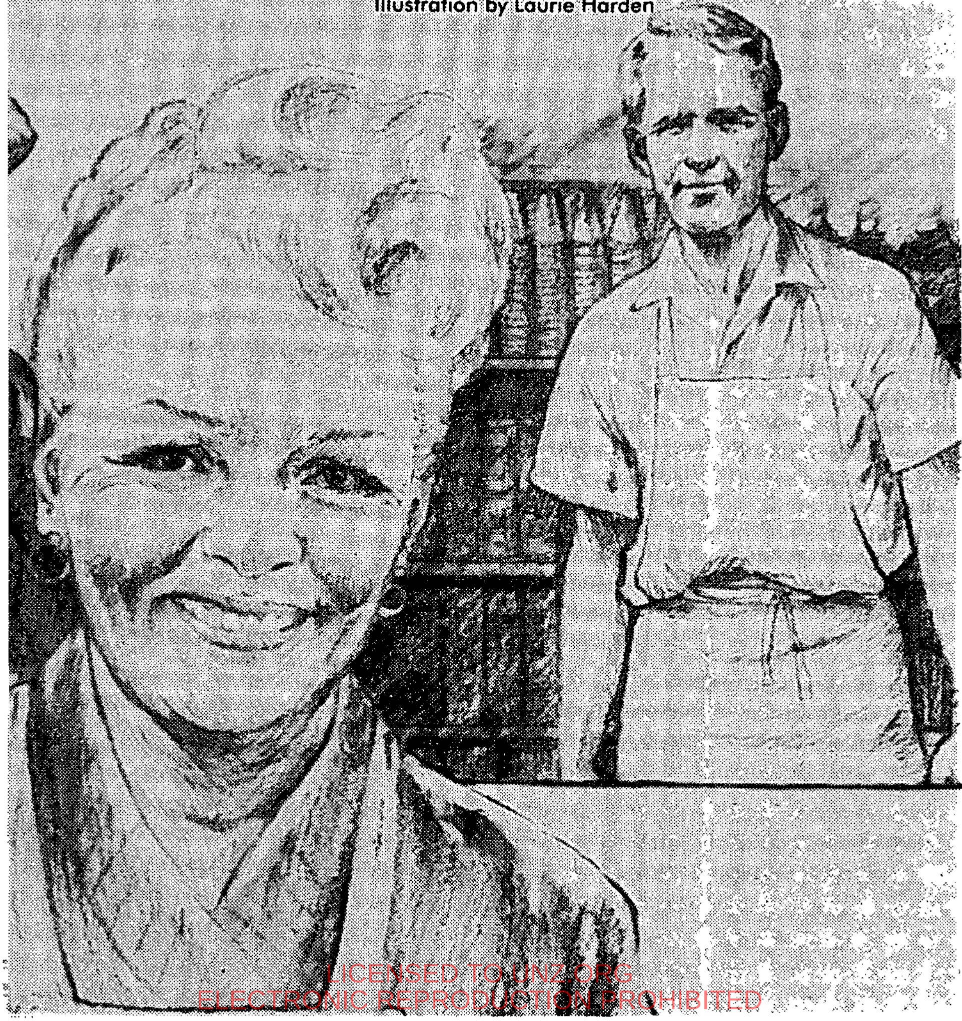
We appreciate comments about the magazine, and would like to hear from more of our readers. Editorial correspondence should include the writer's name and address. Letters can be E-mailed to 71154.662@compuserve.com or posted to Letters to the Editor, *Asimov's,* 1540 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10036. Letters may be shortened and edited for publication.

Ursula K. Le Guin currently has three stories on the 1995 Hugo ballot. One of these finalists, "Forgiveness Day" (*Asimov's,* November 1994), was also the winner of our ninth annual Readers' Award for Best Novella. In her latest story for *Asimov's,* Ms. Le Guin searches for the real America in the magical town of . . .

ETHER OR

Ursula K. Le Guin

Illustration by Laurie Harden



Edna

I never go in the Two Blue Moons any more. I thought about that when I was arranging the grocery window today and saw Corrie go in across the street and open up. Never did go into a bar alone in my life. Sook came by for a candy bar and I said that to her, said I wonder if I ought to go have a beer there some time, see if it tastes different on your own. Sook said Oh Ma you always been on your own. I said I seldom had a moment to myself and four husbands, and she said You know that don't count. Sook's fresh. Breath of fresh air. I saw Needless looking at her with that kind of dog look men get. I was surprised to find it gave me a pang, I don't know what of. I just never saw Needless look that way. What did I expect, Sook is twenty and the man is human. He just always seemed like he did fine on his own. Independent. That's why he's restful. Silvia died years and years and years ago, but I never thought of it before as a long time. I wonder if I have mistaken him. All this time working for him. That would be a strange thing. That was what the pang felt like, like when you know you've made some kind of mistake, been stupid, sewn the seam inside out, left the burner on.

They're all strange, men are. I guess if I understood them I wouldn't find them so interesting. But Toby Walker, of them all he was the strangest. The stranger. I never knew where he was coming from. Roger came out of the desert, Ady came out of the ocean, but Toby came from farther. But he was here when I came. A lovely man, dark all through, dark as forests. I lost my way in him. I loved to lose my way in him. How I wish it was then, not now! Seems like I can't get lost any more. There's only one way to go. I have to keep plodding along it. I feel like I was walking across Nevada, like the pioneers, carrying a lot of stuff I need, but as I go along I have to keep dropping off things. I had a piano once but it got swamped at a crossing of the Platte. I had a good frypan but it got too heavy and I left it in the Rockies. I had a couple ovaries but they wore out around the time we were in the Carson Sink. I had a good memory but pieces of it keep dropping off, have to leave them scattered around in the sage brush, on the sand hills. All the kids are still coming along, but I don't have them. I had them, it's not the same as having them. They aren't with me any more, even Archie and Sook. They're all walking along back where I was years ago. I wonder will they get any nearer than I have to the west side of the mountains, the valleys of the orange groves? They're years behind me.

They're still in Iowa. They haven't even thought about the Sierras yet. I didn't either till I got here. Now I begin to think I'm a member of the Donner Party.

Thos. Sunn

The way you can't count on Ether is a hindrance sometimes, like when I got up in the dark this morning to catch the minus tide and stepped out the door in my rubber boots and plaid jacket with my clam spade and bucket, and overnight she'd gone inland again. The damn desert and the damn sagebrush. All you could dig up there with your damn spade would be a God damn fossil. Personally I blame it on the Indians. I do not believe that a fully civilized country would allow these kind of irregularities in a town. However as I have lived here since 1949 and could not sell my house and property for chicken feed, I intend to finish up here, like it or not. That should take a few more years, ten or fifteen most likely. Although you can't count on anything these days anywhere let alone a place like this. But I like to look after myself, and I can do it here. There is not so much Government meddling and interference and general hindering in Ether as you would find in the cities. This may be because it isn't usually where the Government thinks it is, though it is, sometimes.

When I first came here I used to take some interest in a woman, but it is my belief that in the long run a man does better not to. A woman is a worse hindrance to a man than anything else, even the Government.

I have read the term "a crusty old bachelor" and would be willing to say that that describes me so long as the crust goes all the way through. I don't like things soft in the center. Softness is no use in this hard world. I am like one of my mother's biscuits.

My mother, Mrs. J. J. Sunn, died in Wichita, KS, in 1944, at the age of seventy-nine. She was a fine woman and my experience of women in general does not apply to her in particular.

Since they invented the kind of biscuits that come in a tube that you hit on the edge of the counter and the dough explodes out of it under pressure, that's the kind I buy, and by baking them about one half hour they come out pretty much the way I like them, crust clear through. I used to bake the dough all of a piece, but then discovered that you can break it apart into separate biscuits. I don't hold with reading directions and they are always printed in small, fine print on the damn foil which gets torn when you break open the tube. I use my mother's glasses. They are a good make.

The woman I came here after in 1949 is still here. That was during my brief period of infatuation. Fortunately I can say that she did not get her hooks onto me in the end. Some other men have not been as lucky. She has married or as good as several times and was pregnant and pushing a baby carriage for decades. Sometimes I think everybody under forty in this town is one of Edna's. I had a very narrow escape. I have had a dream about Edna several times. In this dream I am out on the sea fishing for salmon from a small boat, and Edna swims up from the sea waves and tries to climb into the boat. To prevent this I hit her hands with the gutting knife and cut off the fingers, which fall into the water and turn into some kind of little creatures that swim away. I never can tell if they are babies or seals. Then Edna swims after them making a strange noise, and I see that in actuality she is a kind of seal or sea lion, like the big ones in the cave on the south coast, light brown and very large and fat and sleek in the water.

This dream disturbs me, as it is unfair. I am not the kind of man who would do such a thing. It causes me discomfort to remember the strange noise she makes in the dream, when I am in the grocery store and Edna is at the cash register. To make sure she rings it up right and I get the right change, I have to look at her hands opening and shutting the drawers and her fingers working on the keys. What's wrong with women is that you can't count on them. They are not fully civilized.

Roger Hiddenstone

I only come into town sometimes. It's a now and then thing. If the road takes me there, fine, but I don't go hunting for it. I run a two hundred thousand acre cattle ranch, which gives me a good deal to do. I'll look up sometimes and the moon is new that I saw full last night. One summer comes after another like steers through a chute. In the winters, though, sometimes the weeks freeze like the creek water, and things hold still for a while. The air can get still and clear in the winter here in the high desert. I have seen the mountain peaks from Baker and Rainier in the north, Hood and Jefferson, Three-Fingered Jack and the Sisters east of here, on south to Shasta and Lassen, all standing up in the sunlight for eight hundred or a thousand miles. That was when I was flying. From the ground you can't see that much of the ground, though you can see the rest of the universe, nights.

I traded in my two-seater Cessna for a quarterhorse mare, and I generally keep a Ford pickup, though at times I've had a Chevrolet. Any one of them will get me in to town so long as there isn't more than a couple feet of snow on the road. I like to come in now and then and have a Denver omelette at the cafe for breakfast, and a visit with my wife and son. I have a drink at the Two Blue Moons, and spend the night at the motel. By the next morning I'm ready to go back to the ranch to find out what went wrong while I was gone. It's always something.

Edna was only out to the ranch once while we were married. She spent three weeks. We were so busy in the bed I don't recall much else about it, except the time she tried to learn to ride. I put her on Sally, the cutting horse I traded the Cessna plus fifteen hundred dollars for, a highly reliable horse and more intelligent than most Republicans. But Edna had

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that mare morally corrupted within ten minutes. I was trying to explain how she'd interpret what you did with your knees, when Edna started yipping and raking her like a bronc rider. They lit out of the yard and went halfway to Ontario at a dead run. I was riding the old roan gelding and only met them coming back. Sally was unrepentant, but Edna was sore and delicate that evening. She claimed all the love had been jolted out of her. I guess that this was true, in the larger sense, since it wasn't long after that that she asked to go back to Ether. I thought she had quit her job at the grocery, but she had only asked for a month off, and she said Needless would want her for the extra business at Christmas. We drove back to town, finding it a little west of where we had left it, in a very pretty location near the Ochoco Mountains, and we had a happy Christmas season in Edna's house with the children.

I don't know whether Archie was begotten there or at the ranch. I'd like to think it was at the ranch so that there would be that in him drawing him to come back some day. I don't know who to leave all this to. Charlie Echeverria is good with the stock, but can't think ahead two days and couldn't deal with the buyers, let alone the corporations. I don't want the corporations profiting from this place. The hands are nice young fellows, but they don't stay put, or want to. Cowboys don't want land. Land owns you. You have to give in to that. I feel sometimes like all the stones on two hundred thousand acres were weighing on me, and my mind's gone to rimrock. And the beasts wandering and calling across all that land. The cows stand with their young calves in the wind that blows March snow like frozen sand across the flats. Their patience is a thing I try to understand.

Gracie Fane

I saw that old rancher on Main Street yesterday, Mister Hiddenstone, was married to Edna once. He acted like he knew where he was going, but when the street ran out onto the sea cliff he sure did look foolish. Turned round and came back in those high-heel boots, long legs, putting his feet down like a cat the way cowboys do. He's a skinny old man. He went into the Two Blue Moons. Going to try to drink his way back to Eastern Oregon, I guess. I don't care if this town is east or west. I don't care if it's anywhere. It never is anywhere anyway. I'm going to leave here and go to Portland, to the Intermountain, the big trucking company, and be a truck driver. I learned to drive when I was five on my grandpa's tractor. When I was ten I started driving my dad's Dodge Ram, and I've driven pick-ups and delivery vans for Mom and Mr. Needless ever since I got my license. Jase gave me lessons on his eighteen-wheeler last summer. I did real good. I'm a natural. Jase said so. I never got to get out onto the I-5 but only once or twice, though. He kept saying I needed more practice pulling over and parking and shifting up and down. I didn't mind practicing, but then when I got her stopped he'd want to get me into this bed thing he fixed up behind the seats and pull my jeans off, and we had to screw some before he'd go on teaching me anything. My own idea would be to drive a long way and learn a lot and then have some sex and coffee and then drive back a different way, maybe on hills where I'd have to practice braking and stuff. But I guess men have different priorities. Even when I was driving he'd have his arm around my back and be petting my boobs. He has these huge hands can reach right across both boobs at once. It felt good, but it interfered with his concentration teaching me. He would say *Oh baby you're so great* and I would think he meant I was driving great but then he'd start making those sort of groaning noises and I'd have to shift down and find a place to pull out and get in the bed thing again. I used to practice changing gears in my mind when we were screwing and it helped. I could shift him right up and down again. I used to yell *Going eighty!* when I got him really shifted up. *Fuzz on your tail!* And make these sireen noises. That's my CB name: Sireen. Jase got his route shifted in August. I made my plans then. I'm driving for the grocery and saving money till I'm seventeen and go to Portland to work for the Intermountain Company. I want to drive the I-5 from Seattle to LA, or get a run to Salt Lake City. Till I can buy my own truck. I got it planned out.

Tobinye Walker

The young people all want to get out of Ether. Young Americans in a small town want to get up and go. And some do, and some come to a time when they stop talking about where they're going to go when they go. They have come to where they are. Their problem, if it's a problem, isn't all that different from mine. We have a window of opportunity; it closes. I used to walk across the years as easy as a child here crosses the street, but I went lame, and had to stop walking. So this is my time, my heyday, my floruit.

When I first knew Edna she said a strange thing to me; we had been talking, I don't remember what about, and she stopped and gazed at me. "You have a look on you like an unborn child," she said. "You look at things like an unborn child." I don't know what I answered, and only later did I wonder how she knew how an unborn child looks, and whether she meant a fetus in the womb or a child that never came to be conceived. Maybe she meant a newborn child. But I think she used the word she meant to use.

When I first stopped by here, before my accident, there was no town, of course, no settlement. Several peoples came through and sometimes encamped for a season, but it was a range without boundary, though it had names. At that time people didn't have the expectation of stability they have now; they knew that so long as a river keeps running it's a river. Nobody but the beavers built dams, then. Ether always covered a lot of territory, and it has retained that property. But its property is not continuous.

The people I used to meet coming through generally said they came down Humbug Creek from the river in the mountains, but Ether itself never has been in the Cascades, to my knowledge. Fairly often you can see them to the west of it, though usually it's west of them, and often west of the Coast Range in the timber or the dairy country, sometimes right on the sea. It has a broken range. It's an unusual place. I'd like to go back to the center to tell about it, but I can't walk any more. I have to do my flourishing here.

J. Needless

People think there are no Californians. Nobody can come from the promised land. You have to be going to it. Die in the desert, grave by the wayside. I come from California, born there, think about it some. I was born in the Valley of San Arcadio. Orchards. Like a white bay of orange flowers under bare blue-brown mountains. Sunlight like air, like clear water, something you lived in, an element. Our place was a little farmhouse up in the foothills, looking out over the valley. My father was a manager for one of the companies. Oranges flower white, with a sweet, fine scent. Outskirts of Heaven, my mother said once, one morning when she was hanging out the wash. I remember her saying that. We live on the outskirts of Heaven.

She died when I was six and I don't remember a lot but that about her. Now I have come to realize that my wife has been dead so long that I have lost her too. She died when our daughter Corrie was six. Seemed like there was some meaning in it at the time, but if there was I didn't find it.

Ten years ago when Corrie was twenty-one she said she wanted to go to Disneyland for her birthday. With me. Damn if she didn't drag me down there. Spent a good deal to see people dressed up like mice with water on the brain and places made to look like places they weren't. I guess that is the point there. They clean dirt till it is a sanitary substance and spread it out to look like dirt so you don't have to touch dirt. You and Walt are in control there. You can be in any kind of place, space or the ocean or castles in Spain, all sanitary, no dirt. I would have liked it as a boy, when I thought the idea was to run things. Changed my ideas, settled for a grocery.

Corrie wanted to see where I grew up, so we drove over to San Arcadio.

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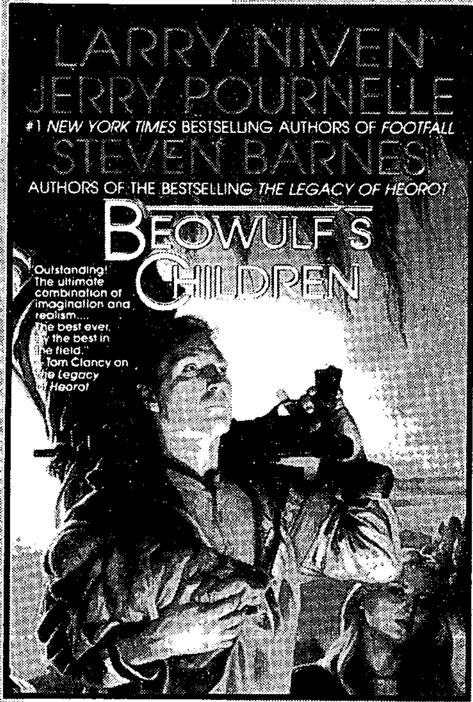
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It wasn't there, not what I meant by it. Nothing but roofs, houses, streets, and houses. Smog so thick it hid the mountains and the sun looked green. God damn, get me out of here, I said, they have changed the color of the sun. Corrie wanted to look for the house but I was serious. Get me out of here, I said, this is the right place but the wrong year. Walt Disney can get rid of the dirt on his property if he likes, but this is going too far. This is my property.

I felt like that. Like I thought it was something I had, but they scraped all the dirt off and underneath was cement and some electronic wiring. I'd as soon not have seen that. People come through here say how can you stand living in a town that doesn't stay in the same place all the time, but have they been to Los Angeles? It's anywhere you want to say it is.

Well, since I don't have California what have I got? A good enough business. Corrie's still here. Good head on her. Talks a lot. Runs that bar like a bar should be run. Runs her husband pretty well too. What do I mean when I say I had a mother, I had a wife? I mean remembering what orange flowers smell like, whiteness, sunlight. I carry that with me. Corinna and Silvia, I carry their names. But what do I have?

What I don't have is right within hand's reach every day. Every day but Sunday. But I can't reach out my hand. Every man in town gave her a child and all I ever gave her was her week's wages. I know she trusts me. That's the trouble. Too late now. Hell, what would she want me in her bed for, the Medicare benefits?

Emma Bodely

Everything is serial killers now. They say everyone is naturally fascinated by a man planning and committing one murder after another without the least reason and not even knowing who he kills personally. There was the man up in the city recently who tortured and tormented three tiny little boys and took photographs of them while he tortured them and of their corpses after he killed them. Authorities are talking now about what they ought to do with these photographs. They could make a lot of money from a book of them. He was apprehended by the police as he lured yet another tiny boy to come with him, as in a nightmare. There were men in California and Texas and I believe Chicago who dismembered and buried innumerably. Then of course it goes back in history to Jack the Ripper who killed poor women and was supposed to be a member of the Royal Family of England, and no doubt before his time there were many other serial killers, many of them members of Royal Families or Emperors and Generals who killed thousands and thousands of people. But in wars they kill people more or less simultaneously, not one by one, so that they are mass murderers, not serial killers, but I'm not sure

I see the difference, really. Since for the person being murdered it only happens once.

I should be surprised if we had a serial killer in Ether. Most of the men were soldiers in one of the wars, but they would be mass murderers, unless they had desk jobs. I can't think who here would be a serial killer. No doubt I would be the last to find out. I find being invisible works both ways. Often I don't see as much as I used to when I was visible. Being invisible however I'm less likely to become a serial victim.

It's odd how the natural fascination they talk about doesn't include the serial victims. I suppose it is because I taught young children for thirty-five years, but perhaps I am unnatural, because I think about those three little boys. They were three or four years old. How strange that their whole life was only a few years, like a cat. In their world suddenly instead of their mother there was a man who told them how he was going to hurt them and then did it, so that there was nothing in their life at all but fear and pain. So they died in fear and pain. But all the reporters tell is the nature of the mutilations and how decomposed they were, and that's all about them. They were little boys not men. They are not fascinating. They are just dead. But the serial killer they tell all about over and over and discuss his psychology and how his parents caused him to be so fascinating, and he lives forever, as witness Jack the Ripper and Hitler the Ripper. Everyone around here certainly remembers the name of the man who serially raped and photographed the tortured little boys before he serially murdered them. He was named Westley Dodd but what were their names?

Of course we the people murdered him back. That was what he wanted. He wanted us to murder him. I cannot decide if hanging him was a mass murder or a serial murder. We all did it, like a war, so it is a mass murder, but we each did it, democratically, so I suppose it is serial, too. I would as soon be a serial victim as a serial murderer, but I was not given the choice.

My choices have become less. I never had a great many, as my sexual impulses were not appropriate to my position in life, and no one I fell in love with knew it. I am glad when Ether turns up in a different place as it is kind of like a new choice of where to live, only I didn't have to make it. I am capable only of very small choices. What to eat for breakfast, oatmeal or corn flakes, or perhaps only a piece of fruit? Kiwi fruits were fifteen cents apiece at the grocery and I bought half a dozen. A while ago they were the most exotic thing, from New Zealand I think and a dollar each, and now they raise them all over the Willamette Valley. But then, the Willamette Valley may be quite exotic to a person in New Zealand. I like the way they're cool in your mouth, the same way the flesh of them looks cool, a smooth green you can see into, like jade stone. I still see things like that perfectly clearly. It's only with people that my eyes are more and more transparent, so that I don't always see what they're doing, and so that they can look right through me as if my eyes were air and say, "Hi, Emma, how's life treating you?"

Life's treating me like a serial victim, thank you.

I wonder if she sees me or sees through me. I don't dare look. She is shy and lost in her crystal dreams. If only I could look after her. She needs looking after. A cup of tea. Herbal tea, echinacea maybe, I think her immune system needs strengthening. She is not a practical person. I am a very practical person. Far below her dreams.

Lo still sees me. Of course Lo is a serial killer as far as birds are concerned, and moles, but although it upsets me when the bird's not dead yet it's not the same as the man taking photographs. Mr. Hiddenstone once told me that cats have the instinct to let a mouse or bird stay alive a while in order to take it to the kittens and train them to hunt, so what seems to be cruelty is thoughtfulness. Now I know that some tom cats kill kittens, and I don't think any tom ever raised kittens and trained them thoughtfully to hunt. The queen cat does that. A tom cat is the Jack the Ripper of the Royal Family. But Lo is neutered, so he might behave like a queen or at least like a kind of uncle if there were kittens around, and bring them his birds to hunt. I don't know. He doesn't mix with other cats much. He stays pretty close to home, keeping an eye on the birds and moles and me. I know that my invisibility is not universal when I wake up in the middle of the night and Lo is sitting on the bed right beside my pillow purring and looking very intently at me. It's a strange thing to do, a little uncanny. His eyes wake me, I think. But it's a good waking, knowing that he can see me, even in the dark.

Edna

All right now, I want an answer. All my life since I was fourteen I have been making my soul. I don't know what else to call it, that's what I called it then, when I was fourteen and came into the possession of my life and the knowledge of my responsibility. Since then I have not had time to find a better name for it. The word responsible means that you have to answer. You can't not answer. You'd might rather not answer, but you have to. When you answer you are making your soul, so that it has a shape to it, and size, and some staying power. I understood that, I came into that knowledge, when I was thirteen and early fourteen, that long winter in the Siskiyous. All right, so ever since then, more or less, I have worked according to that understanding. And I have worked. I have done what came into my hands to do, and I've done it the best I could and with all the mind and strength I had to give to it. There have been jobs, waitressing and clerking, but first of all and always the ordinary work of

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by Bob S. Garrard

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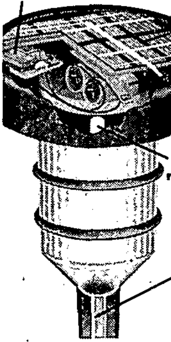
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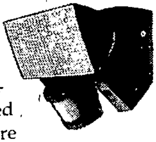

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raising the children and keeping the house so that people can live decently and in health and some degree of peace of mind. Then there is responding to the needs of men. That seems like it should come first. People might say I never thought of anything but answering what men asked, pleasing men and pleasing myself, and goodness knows such questions are a joy to answer if asked by a pleasant man. But in the order of my mind, the children come before the fathers of the children. Maybe I see it that way because I was the eldest daughter and there were four younger than me and my father had gone off. Well, all right then, those are my responsibilities as I see them, those are the questions I have tried always to answer: can people live in this house, and how does a child grow up rightly, and how to be trustworthy.

But now I have my own question. I never asked questions, I was so busy answering them, but am sixty years old this winter and think I should have time for a question. But it's hard to ask. Here it is. It's like all the time I was working keeping house and raising the kids and making love and earning our keep I thought there was going to come a time or there would be some place where all of it all came together. Like it was words I was saying, all my life, all the kinds of work, just a word here and a word there, but finally all the words would make a sentence, and I could read the sentence. I would have made my soul and know what it was for.

But I have made my soul and I don't know what to do with it. Who wants it? I have lived sixty years. All I'll do from now on is the same as what I have done only less of it, while I get weaker and sicker and smaller all the time, shrinking and shrinking around myself, and die. No matter what I did, or made, or know. The words don't mean anything. I ought to talk with Emma about this. She's the only one who doesn't say stuff like, "You're only as old as you think you are," "Oh Edna you'll never be old," rubbish like that. Toby Walker wouldn't talk that way either, but he doesn't say much at all any more. Keeps his sentence to himself. My kids that still live here, Archie and Sook, they don't want to hear anything about it. Nobody young can afford to believe in getting old.

So is all the responsibility you take only useful then, but no use later—disposable? What's the use, then? All the work you did is just gone. It doesn't make anything. But I may be wrong. I hope so, I would like to have more trust in dying. Maybe it's worth while, like some kind of answering, coming into another place. Like I felt that winter in the Siskiyous, walking on the snow road between black firs under all the stars, that I was the same size as the universe, the same thing as the universe. And if I kept on walking ahead there was this glory waiting for me. In time I would come into glory. I knew that. So that's what I made my soul for. I made it for glory.

And I have known a good deal of glory. I'm not ungrateful. But it doesn't last. It doesn't come together to make a place where you can live, a house.

It's gone and the years go. What's left? Shrinking and forgetting and thinking about aches and acid indigestion and cancers and pulse rates and bunions until the whole world is a room that smells like urine, is that what all the work comes to, is that the end of the babies' kicking legs, the children's eyes, the loving hands, the wild rides, the light on water, the stars over the snow? Somewhere inside it all there has to still be the glory.

Ervin Muth

I have been watching Mr. "Toby" Walker for a good while, checking up on things, and if I happened to be called upon to I could state with fair certainty that this "Mr. Walker" is *not an American.* My research has taken me considerably farther afield than that. But there are these "gray areas" or some things which many people as a rule are unprepared to accept. It takes training.

My attention was drawn to these kind of matters in the first place by scrutinizing the town records on an entirely different subject of research. Suffice it to say that I was checking the title on the Fane place at the point in time when Mrs. Osey Jean Fane put the property into the hands of Ervin Muth Relator, of which I am proprietor. There had been a dispute concerning the property line on the east side of the Fane property in 1939 into which, due to being meticulous concerning these kind of detailed responsibilities, I checked. To my surprise I was amazed to discover that the adjoining lot, which had been developed in 1906, had been in the name of Tobinye Walker since that date, 1906! I naturally assumed at that point in time that this "Tobinye Walker" was "Mr. Toby Walker's" father and thought little more about the issue until my researches into another matter, concerning the Essel/Emmer lots, in the town records indicated that the name "Tobinye Walker" was shown as purchaser of a livery stable on that site (on Main St. between Rash St. and Goreman Ave.) in 1880.

While purchasing certain necessaries in the Needless Grocery Store soon after, I encountered Mr. Walker in person. I remarked in a jocular vein that I had been meeting his father and grandfather. This was of course a mere pleasantry. Mr. "Toby" Walker responded in what struck me as a suspicious fashion. There was some taking aback going on. Although with laughter. His exact words, to which I can attest, were the following: "I had no idea that you were capable of traveling in time!"

This was followed by my best efforts to seriously inquire concerning the persons of his same name that my researches in connection with my work as a relator had turned up. These were only met with facetious remarks such as, "I've lived here quite a while, you see," and, "Oh, I remember when Lewis and Clark came through," a statement in reference to the celebrated explorers of the Oregon Trail, who I ascertained later to have been in Oregon in 1806.

Soon after Mr. Toby Walker "*walked*" away, thus ending the conversation.

I am convinced by evidence that "Mr. Walker" is an illegal immigrant from a foreign country who has assumed the name of a Founding Father of this fine community, that is to wit the Tobinye Walker who purchased the livery stable in 1880. I have my reasons.

My research shows conclusively that the Lewis and Clark Expedition sent by President Thos. Jefferson did not pass through any of the localities that our fine community of Ether has occupied over the course of its history. Ether never got that far North.

If Ether is to progress to fulfill its destiny as a Destination Resort on the beautiful Oregon Coast and Desert as I visualize it with a complete down-town entertainment center and entrepreneurial business community, including hub motels, RV facilities, and a Theme Park, the kind of thing that is represented by "Mr." Walker will have to go. It is the American way to buy and sell houses and properties continually in the course of moving for the sake of upward mobility and self-improvement. Stagnation is the enemy of the American way. The same person owning the same property since 1906 is unnatural and Unamerican. Ether is an American town and moves all the time. That is its destiny. I can call myself an expert.

Starra Walinow Amethyst

I keep practicing love. I was in love with that French actor Gerard but it's really hard to say his last name. Frenchmen attract me. When I watch *Star Trek: The Next Generation* reruns I'm in love with Captain Jean-Luc Picard, but I can't stand Commander Riker. I used to be in love with Heathcliff when I was twelve and Miss Freff gave me *Wuthering Heights* to read. And I was in love with Sting for a while before he got weirder. Sometimes I think I am in love with Lieutenant Worf but that is pretty weird, with all those sort of wrinkles and horns on his forehead, since he's a Klingon, but that's not really what's weird. I mean it's just in the TV that he's an alien. Really he is a human named Michael Dorn. That is so weird to me. I mean I never have seen a real black person except in movies and TV. Everybody in Ether is white. So a black person would actually be an alien here. I thought what it would be like if somebody like that came into like the drug store, really tall, with that dark brown skin and dark eyes and those very soft lips that look like they could get hurt so easily, and asked for something in that really, really

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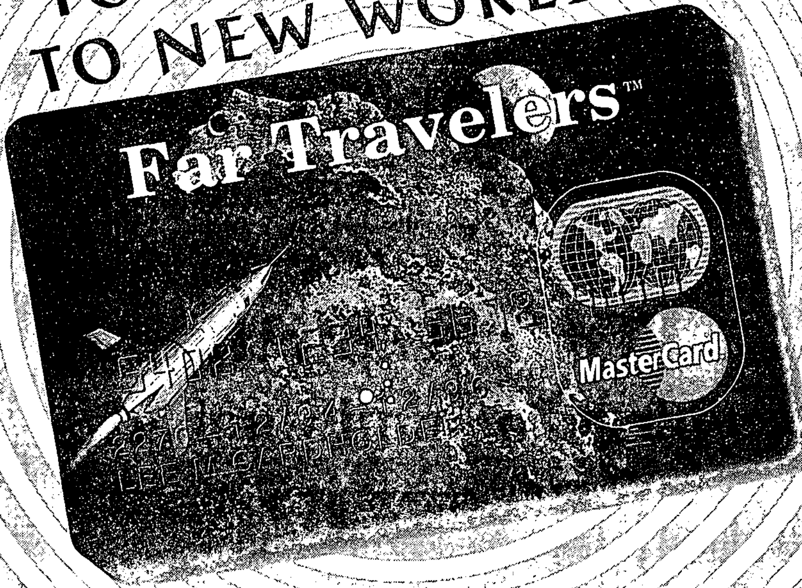

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deep voice. Like, "Where would I find the aspirin?" And I would show him where the aspirin kind of stuff is. He would be standing beside me in front of the shelf, really big and tall and dark, and I'd feel warmth coming out of him like out of an iron woodstove. He'd say to me in a very low voice, "I don't belong in this town," and I'd say back, "I don't either," and he'd say, "Do you want to come with me," only really really nicely, not like a come-on but like two prisoners whispering how to get out of prison together. I'd nod, and he'd say, "Back of the gas station, at dusk."

At dusk.

I love that word. Dusk. It sounds like his voice.

Sometimes I feel weird thinking about him like this. I mean, because he is actually real. If it was just Worf, that's okay, because Worf is just this alien in some old reruns of a show. But there is actually a Michael Dorn. So thinking about him in a sort of story that way makes me uncomfortable sometimes, because it's like I was making him a toy, something I can do anything with, like a doll. That seems like it was unfair to him. And it makes me sort of embarrassed when I think about how he actually has his own life with nothing to do with this dumb girl in some hick town he never heard of. So I try to make up somebody else to make that kind of story about. But it doesn't work.

I really tried this spring to be in love with Morrie Stromberg, but it didn't work. He's really beautiful looking. It was when I saw him shooting baskets that I thought maybe I could be in love with him. His legs and arms are long and smooth and he moves smooth and looks kind of like a mountain lion, with a low forehead and short dark blond hair, tawny colored. But all he ever does is hang out with Joe's crowd and talk about sport scores and cars, and once in class he was talking with Joe about me so I could hear, like "Oh yeah Starra, wow, *she* reads *books,*" not really mean, but kind of like I was like an alien from another planet, just totally absolutely strange. Like Worf or Michael Dorn would feel here. Like he meant okay, it's okay to be like that only not here. Somewhere else, okay? As if Ether wasn't already somewhere else. I mean, didn't it use to be the Indians that lived here, and now there aren't any of them either? So who belongs here and where does it belong?

About a month ago Mom told me the reason she left my father. I don't remember anything like that. I don't remember any father. I don't remember anything before Ether. She says we were living in Seattle and they had a store where they sold crystals and oils and New Age stuff, and when she got up one night to go to the bathroom he was in my room holding me. She wanted to tell me everything about how he was holding me and stuff, but I just went, "So, like, he was molesting me." And she went, "Yeah," and I said, "So what did you do?" I thought they would have had a big fight. But she said she didn't say anything, because she was afraid of him. She said, "See, to him it was like he owned me and you. And when

I didn't go along with that, he would get real crazy." I think they were into a lot of pot and heavy stuff, she talks about that sometimes. So anyway next day when he went to the store she just took some of the crystals and stuff they kept at home, we still have them, and got some money they kept in a can in the kitchen just like she does here, and got on the bus to Portland with me. Somebody she met there gave us a ride here. I don't remember any of that. It's like I was born here. I asked did he ever try to look for her, and she said she didn't know but if he did he'd have a hard time finding her here. She changed her last name to Amethyst, which is her favorite stone. Walinow was her real name. She says it's Polish.

I don't know what his name was. I don't know what he did. I don't care. It's like nothing happened. I'm never going to belong to anybody.

What I know is this, I am going to love people. They will never know it. But I am going to be a great lover. I know how. I have practiced. It isn't when you belong to somebody or they belong to you or stuff. That's like Chelsey getting married to Tim because she wanted to have the wedding and the husband and a no-wax kitchen floor. She wanted stuff to belong to.

I don't want stuff, but I want practice. Like we live in this shack with no kitchen let alone a no-wax floor, and we cook on a trashburner, with a lot of crystals around, and cat pee from the strays Mom takes in, and Mom does stuff like sweeping out for Myrella's beauty parlor, and gets zits because she eats Hostess Twinkies instead of food. Mom needs to get it together. But I need to give it away.

I thought maybe the way to practice love was to have sex so I had sex with Danny last summer. Mom bought us condoms and made me hold hands with her around a bayberry candle and talk about the Passage Into Womanhood. She wanted Danny to be there too but I talked her out of it. The sex was okay but what I was really trying to do was be in love. It didn't work. Maybe it was the wrong way. He just got used to getting sex and so he kept coming around all fall, going "Hey Starra baby you know you need it." He wouldn't even say that it was him that needed it. If I need it, I can do it a lot better myself than he can. I didn't tell him that. Although I nearly did when he kept not letting me alone after I told him to stop. If he hadn't finally started going with Dana I might would have told him.

I don't know anybody else here I can be in love with. I wish I could practice on Archie but what's the use while there's Gracie Fane? It would just be dumb. I thought about asking Archie's father Mr. Hiddenstone if I could work on his ranch, next time we get near it. I could still come see Mom, and maybe there would be like ranch hands or cowboys. Or Archie would come out sometimes and there wouldn't be Gracie. Or actually there's Mr. Hiddenstone. He looks like Archie. Actually handsomer. But I guess he is too old. He has a face like the desert. I noticed his eyes are the same color as Mom's turquoise ring. But I don't know if he needs a cook or anything and I suppose fifteen is too young.

J. Needless

Never have figured out where the Hohovars come from. Somebody said White Russia. That figures. They're all big and tall and heavy with hair so blond it's white and those little blue eyes. They don't look at you. Noses like new potatoes. Women don't talk. Kids don't talk. Men talk like, "Vun case yeast peggets, tree case piggle beet." Never say hello, never say goodbye, never say thanks. But honest. Pay right up in cash. When they come in town they're all dressed head to foot, the women in these long dresses with a lot of fancy stuff around the bottom and sleeves, the little girls just the same as the women, even the babies in the same long stiff skirts, all of them with bonnet things that hide their hair. Even the babies don't look up. Men and boys in long pants and shirt and coat even when it's desert here and a hundred and five in July. Something like those ammish folk on the east coast, I guess. Only the Hohovars have buttons. A lot of buttons. The vest things the women wear have about a thousand buttons. Men's flies the same. Must slow 'em down getting to the action. But everybody says buttons are no problem when they get back to their community. Everything off. Strip naked to go to their church. Tom Sunn swears to it, and Corrie says she used to sneak out there more than once on Sunday with a bunch of other kids to see the Hohovars all going over the hill buck naked, singing in their language. That would be some sight, all those tall, heavy-fleshed, white-skinned, big-ass, big-tit women parading over the hill. Barefoot, too. What the hell they do in church I don't know. Tom says they commit fornication but Tom Sunn don't know shit from a hole in the ground. All talk. Nobody I know has ever been over that hill.

Some Sundays you can hear them singing.

Now religion is a curious thing in America. According to the Christians there is only one of anything. On the contrary there seems to me to be one or more of everything. Even here in Ether we have, that I know of, Baptists of course, Methodists, Church of Christ, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Catholic though no church in town, a Quaker, a lapsed Jew, a witch, the Hohovars, and the gurus or whatever that lot in the grange are. This is not counting most people, who have no religious affiliation except on impulse.

That is a considerable variety for a town this size. What's more, they try out each other's churches, switch around. Maybe the nature of the town makes us restless. Anyhow people in Ether generally live a long time, though not as long as Toby Walker. We have time to try out different things. My daughter Corrie has been a Baptist as a teen-ager, a

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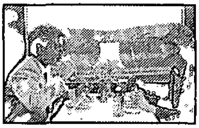

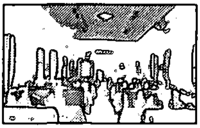

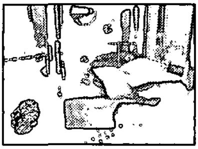

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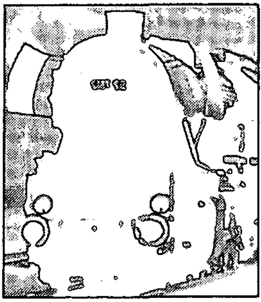

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Methodist while in love with Jim Fry, then had a go at the Lutherans. She was married Methodist but is now the Quaker, having read a book. This may change, as lately she has been talking to the witch, Pearl W. Amethyst, and reading another book, called *Crystals And You*.

Edna says the book is all tosh. But Edna has a harder mind than most. Edna is my religion, I guess. I was converted years ago.

As for the people in the grange, the guru people, they caused some stir when they arrived ten years ago, or is it twenty now. Maybe it was in the sixties. Seems like they've been there a long time when I think about it. My wife was still alive. Anyhow, that's a case of religion mixed up some way with politics, not that it isn't always.

When they came to Ether they had a hell of a lot of money to throw around, though they didn't throw much my way. Bought the old grange and thirty acres of pasture adjacent. Put a fence right round and God damn if they didn't electrify that fence. I don't mean the little jolt you might run in for steers but a kick would kill an elephant. Remodeled the old grange and built on barns and barracks and even a generator. Everybody inside the fence was to share everything in common with everybody else inside the fence. Though from outside the fence it looked like the Guru shared a lot more of it than the rest of 'em. That was the political part. Socialism. The bubonic socialism. Rats carry it and there is no vaccine. I tell you people here were upset. Thought the whole population behind the iron curtain plus all the hippies in California were moving in next Tuesday. Talked about bringing in the National Guard to defend the rights of citizens. Personally I'd of preferred the hippies over the National Guard. Hippies were unarmed. They killed by smell alone, as people said. But at the time there was a siege mentality here. A siege inside the grange, with their electric fence and their socialism, and a siege outside the grange, with their rights of citizens to be white and not foreign and not share anything with anybody.

At first the guru people would come into the town in their orange color T-shirts, doing a little shopping, talking politely. Young people got invited into the grange. They were calling it the osh rom by then. Corrie told me about the altar with the marigolds and the big photograph of Guru Jaya Jaya Jaya. But they weren't really friendly people and they didn't get friendly treatment. Pretty soon they never came into town, just drove in and out the road gate in their orange Buicks. Sometime along in there the Guru Jaya Jaya Jaya was supposed to come from India to visit the osh rom. Never did. Went to South America instead and founded an osh rom for old Nazis, they say. Old Nazis probably have more money to share with him than young Oregonians do. Or maybe he came to find his osh rom and it wasn't where they told him.

It has been kind of depressing to see the T-shirts fade and the Buicks break down. I don't guess there's more than two Buicks and ten, fifteen people left in the osh rom. They still grow garden truck, eggplants, all kinds of peppers, greens, squash, tomatoes, corn, beans, blue and rasp and straw and marion berries, melons. Good quality stuff. Raising crops takes some skill here where the climate will change overnight. They do beautiful irrigation and don't use poisons. Seen them out there picking bugs off the plants by hand. Made a deal with them some years ago to supply my produce counter and have not regretted it. Seems like Ether is meant to be a self-sufficient place. Every time I'd get a routine set up with a supplier in Cottage Grove or Prineville, we'd switch. Have to call up and say sorry, we're on the other side of the mountains again this week, cancel those cantaloupes. Dealing with the guru people is easier. They switch along with us.

What they believe in aside from organic gardening I don't know. Seems like the Guru Jaya Jaya Jaya would take some strenuous believing, but people can put their faith in anything, I guess. Hell, I believe in Edna.

Archie Hiddenstone

Dad got stranded in town again last week. He hung around a while to see if the range would move back east, finally drove his old Ford over to Eugene and up the McKenzie River highway to get back to the ranch. Said he'd like to stay but Charlie Echevarria would be getting into some kind of trouble if he did. He just doesn't like to stay away from the place more than a night or two. It's hard on him when we turn up way over here on the coast like this.

I know he wishes I'd go back with him. I guess I ought to. I ought to live with him. I could see Mama every time Ether was over there. It isn't that. I ought to get it straight in my mind what I want to do. I ought to go to college. I ought to get out of this town. I ought to get away.

I don't think Gracie ever actually has seen me. I don't do anything she can see. I don't drive a semi.

I ought to learn. If I drove a truck she'd see me. I could come through Ether off the I-5 or down from 84, wherever. Like that shit kept coming here last summer she was so crazy about. Used to come into the Seven-Eleven all the time for Gatorade. Called me Boy. Hey boy gimme the change in quarters. She'd be sitting up in his eighteen-wheeler playing with the gears. She never came in. Never even looked. I used to think maybe she was sitting there with her jeans off. Bareass on that truck seat. I don't know why I thought that. Maybe she was.

I don't want to drive a God damn stinking semi or try to feed a bunch of steers in a God damn desert either or sell God damn Hostess Twinkies to crazy women with purple hair either. I ought to go to college. Learn something. Drive a sports car. A Miata. Am I going to sell Gatorade to shits all my life? I ought to be somewhere that is somewhere.

I dreamed the moon was paper and I lit a match and set fire to it. It flared up just like a newspaper and started dropping down fire on the roofs, scraps of burning. Mama came out of the grocery and said, "That'll take the ocean." Then I woke up. I heard the ocean where the sagebrush hills had been.

I wish I could make Dad proud of me anywhere but the ranch. But that's the only place he lives. He won't ever ask me to come live there. He knows I can't. I ought to.

Edna

Oh how my children tug at my soul just as they tugged at my breasts, so that I want to yell Stop! I'm dry! You drank me dry years ago! Poor sweet stupid Archie. What on earth to do for him. His father found the desert he needed. All Archie's found is a tiny little oasis he's scared to leave.

I dreamed the moon was paper, and Archie came out of the house with a box of matches and tried to set it afire, and I was frightened and ran into the sea.

Ady came out of the sea. There were no tracks on that beach that morning except his, coming up toward me from the breaker line. I keep thinking about the men lately. I keep thinking about Needless. I don't know why. I guess because I never married him. Some of them I wonder why I did, how it came about. There's no reason in it. Who'd ever have thought I'd ever sleep with Tom Sunn? But how could I go on saying no to a need like that? His fly bust every time he saw me across the street. Sleeping with him was like sleeping in a cave. Dark, uncomfortable, echoes, bears farther back in. Bones. But a fire burning. Tom's true soul is that fire burning, but he'll never know it. He starves the fire and smothers it with wet ashes, he makes himself the cave where he sits on cold ground gnawing bones. Women's bones.

But Mollie is a brand snatched from his burning. I miss Mollie. Next time we're over east again I'll go up to Pendleton and see her and the grandbabies. She doesn't come. Never did like the way Ether ranges. She's a stay-putter. Says all the moving around would make the children insecure. It didn't make her insecure in any harmful way that I can see. It's her Eric that would disapprove. He's a snob. Prison clerk. What a job. Walk out of a place every night where the others are all locked in, how's that for a ball and chain? Sink you if you ever tried to swim.

Where did Ady swim up from I wonder? Somewhere deep. Once he said he was Greek, once he said he worked on an Australian ship, once he said he had lived on an island in the Philippines where they speak a language nobody else anywhere speaks, once he said he was born in a canoe at sea. It could all have been true. Or not. Maybe Archie should go to sea. Join the Navy or the Coast Guard. But no, he'd drown.

Tad knows he'll never drown. He's Ady's son, he can breathe water. I wonder where Tad is now. That is a tugging too, that not knowing, not knowing where the child is, an aching pull you stop noticing because it never stops. But sometimes it turns you, you find you're facing another direction, like your body was caught by the thorn of a blackberry, by an undertow. The way the moon pulls the tides.

I keep thinking about Archie, I keep thinking about Needless. Ever since I saw him look at Sook. I know what it is, it's that other dream I had. Right after the one with Archie. I dreamed something, it's hard to get hold of, something about being on this long long beach, like I was beached, yes, that's it, I was stranded, and I couldn't move. I was drying up and I couldn't get back to the water. Then I saw somebody walking toward me from way far away down the beach. His tracks in the sand were ahead of him. Each time he stepped in one, in the footprint, it was gone when he lifted his foot. He kept coming straight to me and I knew if he got to me I could get back in the water and be all right. When he got close up I saw it was him. It was Needless. That's an odd dream.

If Archie went to sea he'd drown. He's a drylander, like his father.

Sookie, now, Sook is Toby Walker's daughter. She knows it. She told me, once, I didn't tell her. Sook goes her own way. I don't know if he knows it. I don't think so. She has my eyes and hair. And there were some other possibilities. And I never felt it was the right thing to tell a man unless he asked. Toby didn't ask, because of what he believed about himself. But I knew the night, I knew the moment she was conceived. I felt the child to be leap in me like a fish leaping in the sea, a salmon coming up the river, leaping the rocks and rapids, shining. Toby had told me he couldn't have children—"not with any woman born," he said, with a sorrowful look. He came pretty near telling me where he came from, that night. But I didn't ask. Maybe because of what I believe about myself, that I only have the one life and no range, no freedom to walk in the hidden places.

Anyhow, I told him that that didn't matter, because if I felt like it I could conceive by taking thought. And for all I know that's what happened. I thought Sookie and out she came, red as a salmon, quick and shining. She is the most beautiful child, girl, woman. What does she want to stay here in Ether for? Be an old maid teacher like Emma? Pump gas, give perms, clerk in the grocery? Who'll she meet here? Well God knows I met enough. I like it, she says, I like not knowing where I'll wake up. She's like me. But still there's the tug, the dry longing. Oh, I guess I had too many children. I turn this way, that way, like a compass with forty Norths. Yet always going on the same way in the end. Fitting my feet into my footprints that disappear behind me.

It's a long way down from the mountains. My feet hurt.

Tobinye Walker

Man is the animal that binds time, they say. I wonder. We're bound by time, bounded by it. We move from a place to another place, but from a time to another time only in memory and intention, dream and prophecy. Yet time travels us. Uses us as its road, going on never stopping always in one direction. No exits off this freeway.

I say we because I am a naturalized citizen. I didn't used to be a citizen at all. Time once was to me what my back yard is to Emma's cat. No fences mattered, no boundaries. But I was forced to stop, to settle, to join. I am an American. I am a castaway. I came to grief.

I admit I've wondered if it's my doing that Ether ranges, doesn't stay put. An effect of my accident. When I lost the power to walk straight, did I impart a twist to the locality? Did it begin to travel because my traveling had ceased? If so, I can't work out the mechanics of it. It's logical, it's neat, yet I don't think it's the fact. Perhaps I'm just dodging my responsibility. But to the best of my memory, ever since Ether was a town it's always been a real American town, a place that isn't where you left it. Even when you live there it isn't where you think it is. It's missing. It's restless. It's off somewhere over the mountains, making up in one dimension what it lacks in another. If it doesn't keep moving the malls will catch it. Nobody's surprised it's gone. The white man's his own burden. And nowhere to lay it down. You can leave town easy enough, but coming back is tricky. You come back to where you left it and there's nothing but the parking lot for the new mall and a giant yellow grinning clown made of balloons. Is that all there was to it? Better not believe it, or that's all you'll ever have: blacktop and cinderblock and a blurred photograph of a little boy smiling. The child was murdered along with many others. There's more to it than that, there is an old glory in it, but it's hard to locate, except by accident. Only Roger Hiddenstone can come back when he wants to, riding his old Ford or his old horse, because Roger owns nothing but the desert and a true heart. And of course wherever Edna is, it is. It's where she lives.

I'll make my prophecy. When Starra and Roger lie in each other's tender arms, she sixteen he sixty, when Gracie and Archie shake his pickup truck to pieces making love on the mattress in the back on the road out to the Hohovars, when Ervin Muth and Thomas Sunn get drunk with the farmers in the ashram and dance and sing and cry all night, when Emma Bodeley and Pearl Amethyst gaze long into each other's shining eyes among the cats, among the crystals—that same night Needless the grocer will come at last to Edna. To him she will bear no child but joy. And orange trees will blossom in the streets of Ether. ●

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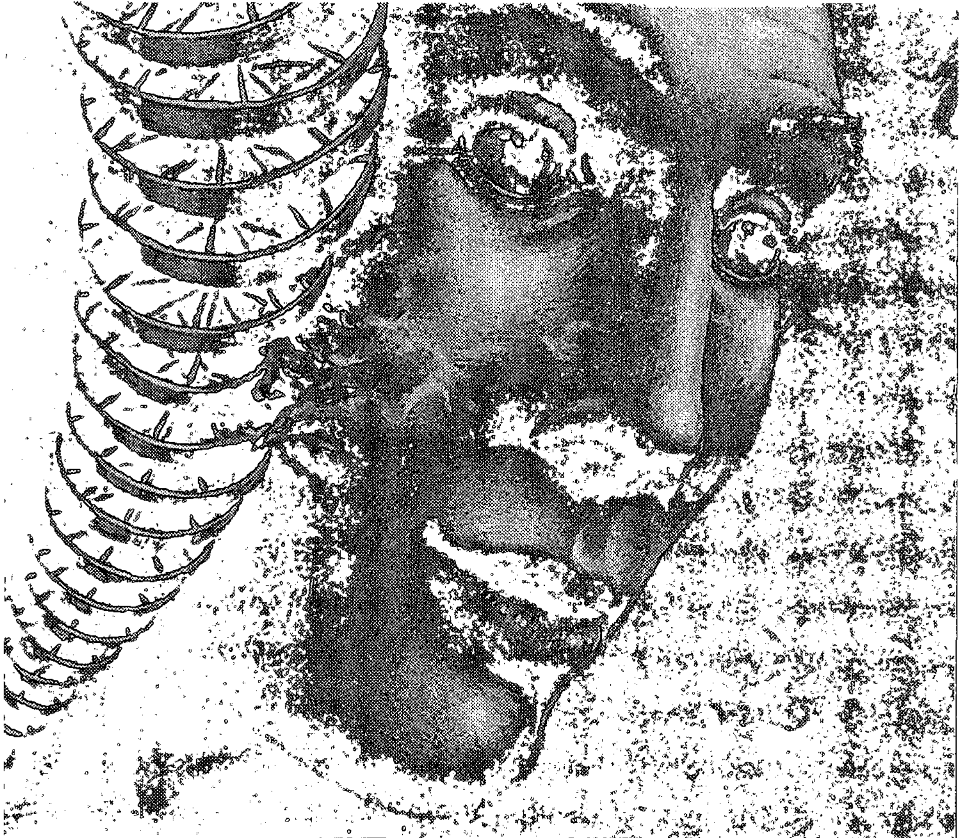
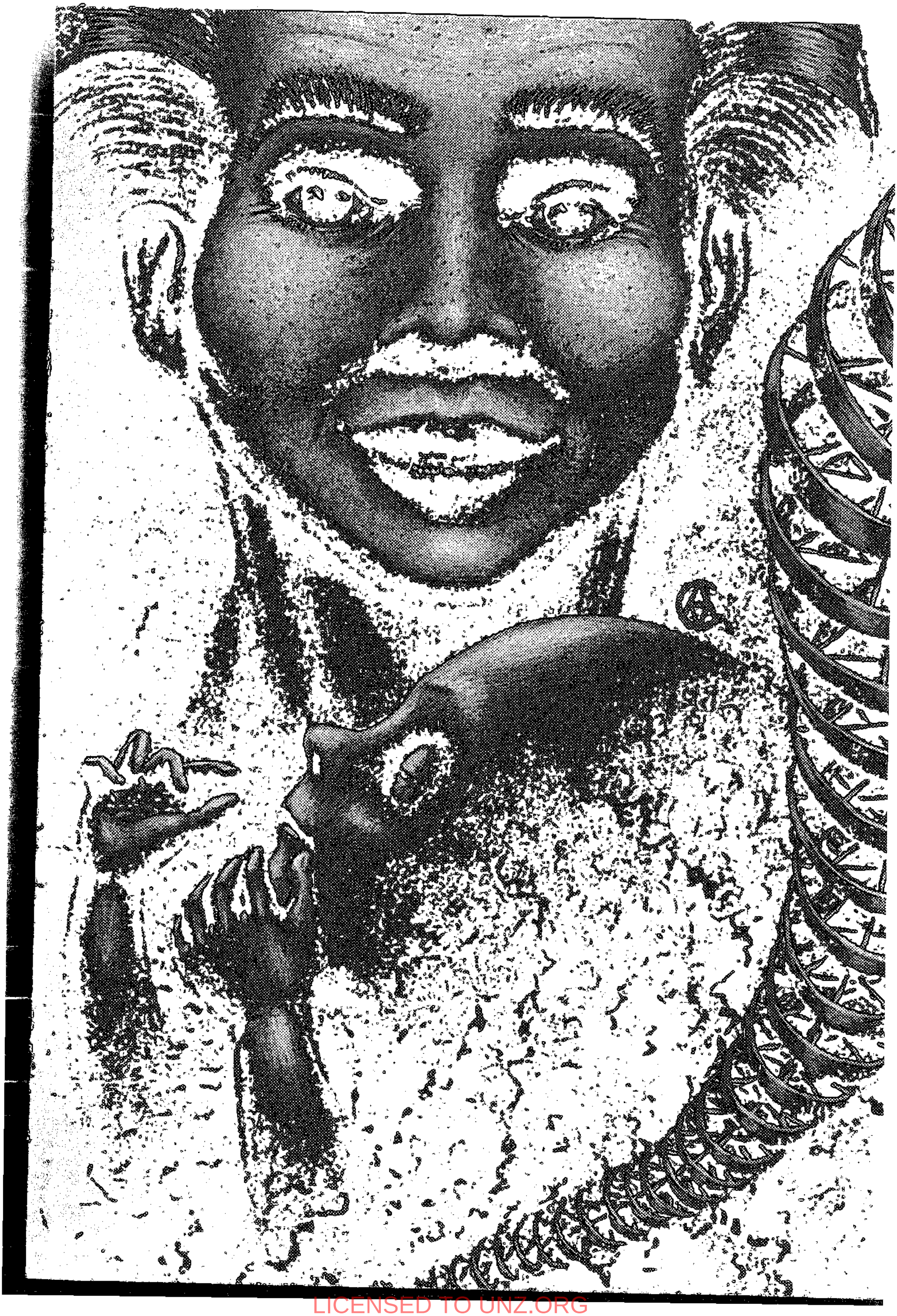


David Marusek

WE WERE OUT OF OUR MINDS WITH JOY

Fairbanks author David Marusek, who lives in a low-maintenance cabin in the woods, has jerry-rigged a writer's life-style. Three part-time jobs leave his mornings free, and he has banished all expensive tastes, hobbies, and vices. Mr. Marusek published his first story in the May 1993 issue of *Asimov's*; his second tale appeared in *Playboy*. "We Were Out of Our Minds with Joy," his third publication, was "conceived during the bout of euphoria I experienced upon selling my first story. Finally, after so much effort and doubt, I could call myself a writer. I went off the deep end for about three months, and in an ecstatic haze, I began the tragic tale of Samson and Eleanor."

Illustration by Alan M. Clark



I

On March 30, 2092, the Department of Health and Human Services issued Eleanor and me a permit. The under secretary of the Population Division called with the news and official congratulations. We were stunned by our good fortune. The under secretary instructed us to contact the National Orphanage. There was a baby in a drawer in Jersey with our names on it. We were out of our minds with joy.

Eleanor and I had been together a year, ever since a friend of mine introduced us at a party in Manhattan. I was there in realbody, though most guests attended by holo. My friend said, "Sam, there's someone you ought to meet." I wasn't prepared to meet anyone; I shouldn't have even come. I was recovering from a long week of design work in my Chicago studio. In those days I would bolt my door and lose myself in my work, even forgetting to eat or sleep. Henry knew to hold all calls. He alone attended me. Then, a week or two later, I'd emerge famished and lonely, and I'd schlep to the nearest party to gorge myself on canapés, cheese cubes, and those tiny, pickled ears of corn. So there I was, unshaven and disheveled, leaning over my friend's buffet table and wearing such a look of gloom as to challenge anyone to approach me. I hadn't come to talk to people, certainly not to meet anyone. I simply needed to be around people for awhile, to watch them, to listen to their chatter. But my friend tapped me on the shoulder. "Sam Harger," he said, "this is Eleanor Starke. Eleanor, Sam."

A woman stood on a patch of carpet from some other room and sipped coffee from a china cup. We smiled at each other while our belt valet systems briefed us. "Oh," she said almost immediately. "Sam Harger, of course, the artist. I have long admired your work, especially the early stuff. In fact, I've just seen one of your spatter pieces at the museum here."

"And where is here?" I said.

A frown flickered across the woman's remarkable face, but she quickly recovered her smile. She must have wondered if my belt system were totally inept. "Budapest," she said.

Budapest, Henry said inside my head. *Sorry, Sam, but her system won't talk to me. I have gone to public sources. She's some big multinational prosecutor, currently free-lance. I'm scanning for bio's now.*

"You have me at a disadvantage," I told the woman standing halfway around the globe. "I don't pay much attention to law, business, or politics. And my valet is an artist's assistant, not a spy." Unless she was projecting a proxy, this Eleanor Starke was a slender woman, pretty, mid-twenties. She had reddish blonde hair; a sweet, round, disarmingly freckled face, full lips, and very heavy eyebrows. Too sweet to be a prosecutor. Her eyes, however, were anything but sweet. They peered out from under their lashes like eels in coral. "And besides," I said, "I was just leaving."

"So soon?" she said. "Pity." Her bushy eyebrows plunged in disappointment. "Won't you stay another moment?"

Sam, whispered Henry, *no two published bio's of her agree on even the most basic data, not even on her date of birth. She's anywhere from 180 to 204 years old.* This woman was powerful, I realized, if she could scramble secured public databases. *But the People Channel has recently tagged her as a probable celebrity. And she has been seen with a host of artist types in the last dozen months: writers, dancers, conductors, holographers, composers.*

Eleanor nibbled at the corner of a pastry. "This is breakfast for me. I wish you could taste it. There's nothing quite like it stateside." She brushed crumbs from her lips. "By the way, your belt valet, your . . . Henry . . . is quaint. So I have a weakness for artists, so what?" This startled me; she had eavesdropped on my system. "Don't look so surprised," she said. "Your uplink is pretty loose; it's practically a broadband. When was the last time you updated your privacy protocol?"

"You sure know how to charm a fellow," I said.

"That's not my goal."

"What is your goal?"

"Dinner, for starters. I'll be in New York tomorrow."

I considered her invitation and the diversion she might offer. I needed a diversion just then. I needed to escape from inside my head. Getting laid would be nice, but not by this heavy-hitting trophy hunter, this Eleanor Starke. I knew a half-dozen other women in the city I would rather spend my time with.

No, the reason I accepted her invitation was curiosity about her eyebrows. I did not doubt that Eleanor Starke had commissioned someone to fashion her face—perhaps building on her original features. She had molded her own face into a sly weapon for her arsenal of dirty attorney tricks. With it she could appear insignificant and vulnerable. With it she could win over juries. She could fool corporate boards, men and women alike. But why the eyebrows? They were massive. When she spoke they dipped and arched with her words. They were distracting, especially to an artist. I found myself staring at them. As a graphic designer, as a painter of old, I itched to scale them down and thin them out. In the five minutes we talked, they captured my full attention. I, myself, would never do eyebrows like them. Then it occurred to me that these were possibly her natural, unaltered brows, for no licensed face designer—with a reputation to protect—would have the nerve to do them. This Eleanor Starke, shark of the multinationals, may have molded the rest of her features to her advantage, even inflicting herself with freckles, but I became convinced that she had been born a bushy-browed baby, and like a string of artist types before me, I took the bait.

"Not dinner," I replied, "but what about lunch?"

Lunch, as it often does, led to dinner. We screwed like bunnies. The eyebrows were genuine, even their color. Over the next few weeks we tried out the beds in our various apartments all up and down the Eastern Seaboard. Soon the novelty wore off. She stopped calling me, and I stopped calling her—we were sated, or so I thought. She departed on a long trip outside the Protectorate. A month had passed when I received a call from Beijing. Her calendar secretary asked if I would care to holo-lunch tomorrow. Her late lunch in China would coincide with my midnight brandy in Buffalo. Sure, why not?

I holoed at the appointed time. She had already begun her meal; she was freighting a morsel of water chestnut to her mouth by chopstick when she noticed me. Her entire face lit up with pleasure. "Hi," she said. "Welcome. I'm so glad you could make it." She sat at a richly lacquered table next to a scarlet wall with golden filigree trim. "Unfortunately, I can't stay," she said, placing the chopsticks on her plate. "Last minute program change. So sorry, but I had to see you, even for a moment. How've you been?"

"Fine," I said.

She wore a loose green silk business suit, and her hair was neatly stacked on top of her head. "Can we reschedule for tomorrow?" she asked.

We gazed at each other for several long moments. I was surprised at how comfortable I was with her and how disappointed. I hadn't realized that I'd missed her so much. "Sure, tomorrow."

That night I couldn't sleep, and the whole next day was colored with anticipation. At midnight I said, "Okay, Henry, take me to the Beijing Hilton."

"She's not there," he replied. "She's at the Wanatabe Tokyo tonight."

Sure enough, the scarlet walls were replaced by paper screens. "There you are," she said. "Good, I'm famished." She uncovered a bowl and dished steamy rice onto her plate while telling me in broad terms about a trade deal she was brokering. "They want me to stay, you know. Hire on at triple my rate. Japanese men are funny when they're desperate. They get so . . . so indifferent."

I sipped my drink. "And what did you tell them?" To my surprise, I was anything but indifferent.

She glanced at me, curious. "I told them I would think about it."

We began to meet for a half hour or so each day and talked about whatever came to mind. El's interests were deep and broad; everything fascinated her. She told me, choking with laughter, anecdotes of famous people in awkward circumstances. She revealed curious truths behind the daily news and pointed out related investment opportunities. She teased out of me all sorts of opinion, gossip, and laughter. Her half of the room changed every day and reflected her hectic itinerary: jade, bamboo, and teak. My half of the room never varied. It was the atrium of my hillside house in Santa Barbara where I went in order to be three hours closer to her. As we talked we looked down the yucca-and chaparral-choked canyon to the campus and beach below, to the channel islands, and beyond them, to the blue-green Pacific that separated us.

Weeks later, when again we met in realbody, I was shy. I didn't know quite what to do with her. So we talked. We sat close together on the couch and tried to pick up any number of conversational threads. With no success. Her body, so close, befuddled me. I knew her body, or thought I did: I'd unwrapped its expensive clothing a dozen times before. But it was a different body now, occupied, as it was, by El. I was about to make love to El, if ever I could get started.

"Nervous, are we?" she laughed, as she unfastened my shirt.

Fortunately, before we went completely off the deep end, the self-destructive parts of our personalities bobbed to the surface. The promise of happiness can be daunting. El snapped first. We were at her Maine townhouse when her security chief holoed into the room. Until then the only member of her belt valet system—what she called her cabinet—that she had allowed me to meet was her calendar secretary. "I have something to show you," said the security chief, glowering at me from under his bushy eyebrows. I glanced at Eleanor who made no attempt to explain or excuse the intrusion. "This is a realtime broadcast," he said and turned to watch as the holoserver overlaid Eleanor's living room with the studio lounge of the *People Channel.* It was during their "Couples Week" feature, and co-hosts Chirp and Ditz were serving up breathless speculation on hapless couples caught by holoeye in public places and yanked for inspection into living rooms across the solar system.

All at once we were outside the Boston restaurant where Eleanor and I had dined that evening. A couple emerged from a cab. He had a black mustache and silver hair and looked like the champion of boredom. She had a vampish hatchet of a face, limp black hair, and vacant eyes.

"Whoodeeze tinguished gentry?" said Ditz to Chirp.

"Carefuh watwesay, lipsome. Dizde ruthless Eleanor K. Starke and'er lately dildude, Samsamson Harger."

I did a double take. The couple on the curb had our bodies and wore our evening clothes, but our heads had been pixeled, were morphed beyond recognition.

Eleanor examined them closely. "Good. Good job."

"Thank you," said her security chief.

"Wait a minute," I said.

Eleanor arched an eyebrow in my direction.

I didn't know what to say. "Isn't commercial broadcast protected by law?"

She laughed and turned to her security chief. "Will this ever be traced to me?"

"No."

"Will it occur each and every time any net decides to broadcast anything about me without my expressed permission?"

"Yes."

"Thank you. You may go." The security chief dissolved. Eleanor put her arms around my neck and looked me in the eye. "I value our privacy."

"That's all fine and good," I replied, "but that was *my* image, too, that you altered without *my* expressed permission."

"So? I was protecting you. You should be grateful."

A week later, Eleanor and I were in my Buffalo apartment. Out of the blue she asked me to order a copy of the newly released memoir installment of a certain best-selling author. She said he was a predecessor of mine, a recent lover, who against her wishes had included several paragraphs about their affair in his reading. I told Henry to fetch the reading, but Eleanor said no, that it would be better to order it through the houseputer. When I did so, the houseputer froze up. It just stopped and wouldn't respond. My apartment's comfort support failed. Lights went out, the kitchen quit, and the bathroom door refused to open. "How many copies do you think he'll sell?" Eleanor laughed.

"I get the point."

I was indeed getting the point: El was a tad too paranoid for me. The last straw came when I discovered that her system was messing with Henry. I asked Henry for his bimonthly report on my business, and he said, *please stand by.* I was sitting at the time and stupidly stood up before I realized it.

"What do you mean, 'please stand by,' Henry? What does 'please stand by' mean?"

My processing capabilities are currently overloaded and unavailable. Please stand by.

Nothing like this had ever happened before. "Henry, what is going on?"

There was no response for a long while, then he whispered, *Take me to Chicago.*

Chicago. My studio. That was where his container was. I left immediately, worried sick. Between outages, Henry was able to assure me that he was essentially sound, but that he was preoccupied in warding off a series of security breaches.

"From where? Henry, tell me who's doing this to you."

He's trying again. No, he's in. He's gone. Here he comes again. Please stand by.

Suddenly my mouth began to water, my saliva tasted like machine oil:

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MXAA8

Henry—or someone—had initiated a terminus purge. I was excreting my interface with Henry. Over the next dozen hours I would spit, sweat, piss, and shit the millions of slave nanoprocessors that resided in the vacuoles of my fat cells and linked me to Henry's box in Chicago. Until I reached my studio, we would be out of contact and I would be on my own. Without a belt valet to navigate the labyrinth of the slipstream tube, I underpassed Illinois altogether and had to backtrack from Toronto. Chicago cabs still respond to voice command, but as I had no way to transfer credit, I was forced to walk ten blocks to the Drexler Building.

Once inside my studio, I rushed to the little ceramic container tucked between a cabinet and the wall. "Are you there?" Henry existed as a pleasant voice in my head. He existed as data streams through space and fiber. He existed as an uroboros signal in a Swiss loopvault. But if Henry existed as a physical being at all, it was as the gelatinous paste inside this box. "Henry?"

The box's ready light blinked on.

"The fucking bitch! How could she? How dare she?"

"Actually, it makes perfect sense."

"Shut up, Henry."

Henry was safe as long as he remained a netless stand-alone. He couldn't even answer the phone for me. He was a prisoner; we were both prisoners in my Chicago studio. Eleanor's security chief had breached Henry's shell millions of times, nearly continuously since the moment I met her at my friend's party. Henry's shell was an off-the-shelf application I had purchased years ago to protect us against garden variety corporate espionage. I had never updated it, and it was worthless.

"Her cabinet is a diplomat-class unit," said Henry. "What do you expect?"

"Shut up, Henry."

At first the invasion was so subtle and Henry so unskilled, that he was unaware of the foreign presence inside his matrix. When he became aware, he mounted the standard defense, but Eleanor's system flowed through its gates like water. So he set about studying each breach, learning and building ever more effective countermeasures. The attacks escalated, grew so epic that Henry's defense soon consumed his full attention.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I did, Sam, several times."

"That's not true. I don't remember you telling me once."

"You have been somewhat preoccupied lately."

"Just shut up."

The question was, how much damage had been done, not to me, but to Henry. There was nothing in my past anyone could use to harm me. I was an artist, after all, not a politician: the public expected me to be shameless. But if Eleanor had damaged Henry to get to my files, I would kill her. I had owned Henry since the days of keyboards and pointing devices. He was the repository of my life's work and life's memory. I could not replace him. He did my bookkeeping, sure, and my taxes, appointments, and legal tasks. He monitored my health, my domiciles, my investments, etc., etc., etc. These functions I could replace; they were commercial programming. I could buy them, and he would modify them to suit his own quirky personality bud. It was his personality bud, itself, I couldn't replace. I had been growing it for eighty years. It was a unique design tool that fit my mind perfectly. I depended on it, on Henry, to read my mind, to engineer the materials I used, and to test my ideas against current tastes. We worked as a team. I had taught him to play the devil's advocate. He provided me feedback, suggestions, ideas, and from time to time—inspiration.

"Eleanor's cabinet was interested neither in your records nor in my personality bud. It simply needed to ascertain, on a continuing basis, that I was still Henry, that no one else had corrupted me."

"Couldn't it just ask?"

"If I were corrupted, do you think I would tell?"

"Are you corrupted?"

"Of course not."

I cringed at the thought of installing Henry back into my body not knowing if he were somebody's dirty little worm.

"Henry, you have a complete backup here, right?"

"Yes."

"One that predates my first contact with Eleanor?"

"Yes."

"And its seal is intact? It hasn't been tampered with, not even read?"

"Yes."

Of course if Henry were corrupted and told me the seal was intact, how would I know otherwise? I didn't know the first thing about this stuff.

"You can use any houseputer," he said, reading me as he always had, "to verify the seal, and to delete and reset me. But I suggest you don't."

"Oh yeah? Why?"

"Because we would lose all I've learned since we met Eleanor. I was getting good, Sam. The breaches were taking exponentially longer for them to achieve. I had almost attained stalemate."

"And meanwhile you couldn't function."

"So buy me more paste. A lot more paste. We have the credit. Think about it. Eleanor's system is aggressive and dominant. It's always in crisis mode. But it's the good guys. If I can learn how to lock it out, I'll be better prepared to meet the bad guys who'll be trying to get to Eleanor through you."

"Good, Henry, except for one essential fact. There is no her and me. I'm dropping her. No, I've already dropped her."

"I see. Tell me, Sam, how many women have you been with since I've known you?"

"How the hell should I know?"

"Well, I know. In the 82.6 years I've associated with you, you've been with 543 women. Your archives reveal at least a hundred more before I was installed."

"If you say so, Henry."

"You doubt my numbers? Do you want me to list their names?"

"I don't doubt your numbers, Henry. But what good are names I've forgotten?" More and more, my own life seemed to me like a Russian novel read long ago. While I could recall the broad outline of the plot, the characters' names eluded me. "Just get to the point."

"The point is, no one has so affected you as Eleanor Starke. Your biometrics have gone off the scale."

"This is more than a case of biometrics," I said, but I knew he was right, or nearly so. The only other woman that had so affected me was my first love, Janice Scholero, who was a century-and-a-quarter gone. Every woman in between was little more than a single wave in a warm sea of feminine companionship.

Until I could figure out how to verify Henry, I decided to isolate him in his container. I told the houseputer to display "Do Not Disturb—Artist at Work" and take messages. I did, in fact, attempt to work, but was too busy obsessing. I mostly watched the nets or paced the studio arguing with Henry. In the evenings I had Henry load a belt—I kept a few antique Henry interfaces in a drawer—with enough functionality so that I could go out and drink. I avoided my usual haunts and all familiar faces.

In the first message she recorded on my houseputer, El said, "Good for you. Call when you're done." In the second she said, "It's been over a week, must be a masterpiece." In the third, "Tell me what's wrong. You're entirely too sensitive. This is ridiculous. Grow up!"

I tried to tell her what was wrong. I recorded a message for her, a whole seething litany of accusation and scorn, but was too cowardly to post it.

In her fourth message, El said, "It's about Henry, isn't it? My security chief told me all about it. Don't worry; they frisk everyone I meet, nothing personal, and they don't rewrite anything. It's their standing orders, and it's meant to protect me. You have no idea, Sam, how many times I'd be dead if it weren't for my protocol.

"Anyway, I've told them to lay off Henry. They said they could install a deadman alarm in Henry's personality bud, but I said no. Complete hands off. Okay? Is that enough?

"Call, Sam. Let me know you're all right. I . . . miss you."

In the meantime I could find no trace of a foreign personality in Henry.

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I knew my Henry just as well as he knew me. His thought process was like a familiar tune to me, and at no time during our weeks of incessant conversation did he strike a false note.

El sent her fifth message from bed where she lay naked between iridescent sheets (of my design). She said nothing. She looked directly at the holoeye, propped herself up, letting the sheet fall to her waist, and brushed her hair. Her chest above her breasts, as I had discovered, was spangled with freckles.

Bouquets of real flowers began to arrive at my door with notes that said simply, "Call."

The best-selling memoirs that had stymied my Buffalo houseputer arrived on pin with the section about Eleanor extant. The author's sim, seated in a cane-backed chair and reading from a leather-bound book, described Eleanor in his soft southern drawl as a "perfumed vulvoid whose bush has somehow migrated to her forehead, a lithe misander with the emotional range of a militia slug." I asked the sim to stop and elaborate. He smiled at me and said, "In her relations with men, Eleanor Starke is not interested in emotional communion. She prefers entertainment of a more childish variety, like poking frogs with a stick. She is a woman of brittle patience with no time for fluffy feelings or fuzzy thoughts. Except in bed. In bed Eleanor Starke likes her men half-baked, the gooier the better. That's why she likes to toy with artists. The higher an opinion a man has of himself, the more painfully sensitive he is, the more polished his hubris, the more fun it is to poke him open and see all the runny mess inside."

"You don't know what you're talking about," I yelled at the sim. "El's not like that at all. You obviously never knew her. She's no saint, but she has a heart, and affection and . . . and . . . go fuck yourself."

"Thank you for your comments. May we quote you? Be on the lookout for our companion volume to this memoir installment, *The Skewered Lash Back,* due out in September from Little Brown Jug."

I had been around for 147 years and was happy with my life. I had successfully navigated several careers and amassed a fortune that even Henry had trouble charting. Still, I jumped out of bed each day with a renewed sense of interest and adventure. I would have been pleased to live the next 147 years in exactly the same way. And yet, when El sent her farewell message—a glum El sitting in a museum somewhere, a wall-sized early canvas of mine behind her—I knew my life to be ashes and dirt.

Seventy-two thick candles in man-sized golden stands flanked me like sentries as I waited and fretted in my tuxedo at the altar rail. The guttering beeswax flames filled the cathedral with the fragrance of clover. *Time Media* proclaimed our wedding the "Wedding of the Year" and broadcast it live on the *Wedding Channel.* A castrati choir, hidden in the gloom beneath the giant bronze pipes of the organ, challenged all to submit to the mercy of Goodness. Their sweet soprano threaded through miles of stone vaults, collecting odd echoes and unexpected harmony. Over six million guests fidgeted in wooden pews that stretched, it seemed, to the horizon. And each guest occupied an aisle seat at the front.

In the network's New York studio, El and I, wearing keyblue body suits, stood at opposite ends of a bare soundstage. On cue, El began the slow march towards me. In Wawel Castle overlooking ancient Cracow, however, she marched through giant cathedral doors, her ivory linen gown awash in morning light. The organ boomed Mendelssohn's wedding march, amplified by acres of marble. Two girls strewed rose petals at Eleanor's feet, while another tended her long train. A gauzy veil hid El's face from all eyes except mine. No man walked at her side; a two-hundred-year-old bride, Eleanor preferred to give herself away.

By the time of the wedding, El and I had been living together for six months. We had moved in together partly out of curiosity, partly out of desperation. Whatever was going on between us was mounting. It was spreading and sinking roots. It was like a thing inside us, but apart and separate from us, too. We talked about it, always "it," not sure what to call it. It complicated our lives, especially El's. We agreed we'd be better off without it and tried to remember, from experiences in our youth, how to fix the feelings we were feeling. The one sure cure, guaranteed to make a man and a woman wish they'd never met, was for them to cohabitate. If there was one thing humankind had learned in four million years of evolution, it was that man and woman were not meant to live in the same hut. And since the passage of the Procreation Ban of 2041, there has been little biological justification for doing so.

So, we co-purchased a townhouse in Connecticut. It wasn't difficult for us to stake out our separate bedrooms and work spaces, but decorating the common areas required the diplomacy and compromise of a border dispute. Once in and settled, we agreed to open our house on Wednesday evenings and began the arduous task of melding our friends and colleagues.

We came to prefer her bedroom for watching the nets and mine for making love. When it came to sleeping, however, she required her own bed—alone. Good, we thought, here was a crack we could wedge open. We surveyed for other incompatibilities. She was a late night person, while I rose early. She liked to travel and go out a lot, while I was a stay-at-homer. She loved classical music, while I could stand only neu-noise. She had a maniacal need for total organization of all things, while for me a cluttered space was a happy space.

These differences, however, seemed only to heighten the pleasure we took in each other. We were opposites attracting, two molecules bonding—I don't know—two dogs trying to get unstuck.

The network logged 6.325 million subscribers to our wedding, altogether a modest rating. Nevertheless, the guest book contained some of the most powerful signatures on the planet (El's admirers) and the confetti rained down for weeks. The network paid for a honeymoon on the Moon, including five days at the Lunar Princess and round-trip fare aboard Pan Am.

Eleanor booked a third seat on the shuttle, not the best portent for a successful honeymoon. She assigned me the window seat, took the aisle seat for herself, and into the seat between us she projected one cabinet member after another. All during the flight, she took their reports, issued orders, and strategized with them, not even pausing for lift-off or docking. Her cabinet consisted of about a dozen officials and, except for her security chief, they were all women. They all appeared older than El's current age, and they all bore a distinct Starke family resemblance: reddish-blond hair, slender build, the eyebrows. If they were real people, rather than the projections of El's belt system, they could be her sisters and brother, and she the spoiled baby of the family.

Two cabinet officers especially impressed me, the attorney general, a smartly dressed woman in her forties with a pinched expression, and the chief of staff, who was the eldest of the lot. This chief of staff coordinated the activities of the rest and was second in command after El. She looked and spoke remarkably like El. She was not El's oldest sister, but El, herself, at seventy. She fascinated me. She was my Eleanor stripped of meat, a stick figure of angles and knobs, her eyebrows gone colorless and thin. Yet her eyes burned bright, and she spoke from a deep well of wisdom and authority. No wonder Henry, a pleasant voice in my head, admired El's cabinet.

It had been ages since I had flown in an orbital craft; my last time had been before the development of airborne nasties, smartactives, militia slugs, visola, and city canopies. In a tube, you hardly noticed your passage across barriers since the tube, itself, was a protuberance of the canopies. Looking out my window, I was surprised to see that the shuttlecraft wing was covered with the same sharkskin used on militia craft. But it made sense. Once out of the hangar we were in the great, wild outside and the target of every nastie released into the atmosphere. On the runway, the sharkskin's protective slime foamed away contaminants. After takeoff, the skin rippled and trimmed itself, and our speed was our protection until we reached the stratosphere where the skin relaxed and resumed its foaming.

The flight attendant, a michelle named Traci, was excellent. When the view outside my window lost my interest, she brought me a pillow. I had been about to ask for one. She offered us drinks, including Eleanor's chief of staff who happened to be in the middle seat at the moment. This pleased Eleanor immensely. The michelle knew that if a passenger reserved a seat for her belt valet, it was best to treat the valet as real.

We watched the michelle attend to the other passengers in our compartment. She had well-rounded breasts and hips and filled out her smartly tailored teal uniform. She was diminutive—a michelle grew to about five feet tall—a doll woman, dark complexioned and full of promise, Mediterranean. Eleanor said, "Applied People employees are consistently superior to MacPeople people."

"No matter their agency, michelles are superior," said her chief of staff. "You simply cannot fluster them."

Before my nap, I left my seat to use the rest room. The forward toilets were occupied, so I went aft through the coach section. All of the passengers there were clumped in the most forward seats, except for five people—one woman and four men—at the tail, with a large unoccupied section between the two groups. Odd. When I reached the tail, I noticed a sharp, foul odor, like rotting cheese. The odor was even stronger in the rest room, and I wondered how Pan Am could operate so negligently. Returning through the coach section, I realized that the bulk of passengers were sitting forward to avoid the odor, and I wondered why the small group of five remained at the tail. When I glanced back at them, they—all of them—regarded me with cold malice.

Back in my seat, I plumped my pillow and prepared to nap. El's security chief, whose turn it was in the middle, looked at me and leered, "So what you think of 'em?"

"Them who?"

"The stinkers back there."

"The stinkers?" I wasn't familiar with the term. (*Seared,* said Henry in my head.) "You mean those people were seared?"

"Yeah, but don't worry. They're harmless, and then some."

I was appalled. Of course I'd heard that the National Militia was searing living individuals these days—felons mostly, whose crimes were not heinous enough to warrant outright extermination—but I had thought it to be a rare punishment. And now here were five of the seared on the same shuttle. "Where are they going?"

"Let's see," said the security chief. "They have passage booked from the Moon aboard a Jupiter freighter. They're emigrating to the colonies, most likely. Good riddance."

So the flight, so the honeymoon. Within hours of checking into the Sweetheart Suite of the Lunar Princess, Eleanor was conducting full cabinet meetings. I was left to take bounding strolls around the duty-free dome alone. I didn't mind. I like my solitude.

I happened to be in the suite when Eleanor "took the call." The official seal of the Tri-Discipline Council filled our living room with its stately gyration and dissolved as Audrey Foldstein, herself, appeared before us sitting at her huge oaken desk. She greeted us and apologized for barging in on our honeymoon. I was dumbfounded. Here was Audrey Foldstein, chair of the Tri-D Board of Governors, one of the most powerful persons on Earth, parked at her trademark desk in our hotel suite. She turned to me and praised the inventiveness of my work in package design, and especially the camouflage work I had done forty years before for the National Militia. She also mentioned my evacuation blanket for trauma and burn victims. She spoke sincerely and at length and then turned to Eleanor. "Ms. Starke, do you know why I'm here?"

"I believe so, Ms. Foldstein." Eleanor sat erect, regarded the holo with a steady gaze, and sent me a message through Henry, *Eleanor's chief of staff extends Eleanor's apology for not informing you sooner of her nomination. She would have told you had she thought there was any chance of her actually being designated.*

Nomination to what? I tongued back.

"These are the most exciting days known to humankind," said Audrey Foldstein, "as well as the most perilous. Each hour that passes brings wonders—and dangers—unimagined by our parents. . . ." Foldstein appeared to be in her mid-forties, an age compatible with her monstrous authority, while my El looked like a devoted daughter. ". . . and as a member of the Tri-Discipline Board of Governors, one must ever dedicate oneself—no, *consecrate* oneself—to upholding these principles, namely . . ."

A Tri-D Governor! Was that possible? My El?

". . . You will be asked to make decisions and bear responsibilities no reasonable person would choose to make or bear. You will be a target of vocal—even violent—recrimination. And with a new family . . ." Ms. Foldstein glanced at me, ". . . you will be that much more vulnerable . . ."

Henry whispered, *Eleanor's chief of staff says Eleanor asks twice if you know what this means.*

I puzzled over this message. It had been flattened by its passage through two artificial minds. What Eleanor had probably said was, "Do you know what this means? Do you know what this means?"

Yes, dear Eleanor, I tongued through Henry, *I do. It means that every door everywhere stands open to you. Congratulations, lover. It means you have climbed onto the world stage.*

She glanced at me and winked.

By the time we shuttled back to Earth, the confirmation process was well underway. Over the next few tortuous weeks, Congressional Committees strenuously debated Eleanor's designation in public, while multinationals and the National Militia deliberated in camera. One day El would float through the house in regal exaltation. The next day she would collapse on the couch to bitterly rue the thousands of carefully buried indiscretions of her past that threatened to resurface. On the morning she testified before the Tri-D Board of Governors, she was centered, amiable, and razor-sharp. Immediately upon returning home she summoned me to my bedroom and demanded rushed, rough sex from me. Twenty minutes later she couldn't stand the sorry sight of me.

I supported her every which way I could think of. I put my own career on hold. Actually, I hadn't been to my Chicago studio since nursing Henry there.

When Eleanor was finally confirmed, we took the slipstream tube down to Cozumel for some deep-sea diving and beachcombing. It was meant to be a working vacation, but by then I suffered no illusions about Eleanor's ability to relax. There were too many plans to make and people to meet. And indeed, she kept some member of her cabinet at her side at all times: on the beach, in the boat, at the Mayan theme village, even in the cramped quarters of the submersible.

We had planned to take advantage of an exclusive juve clinic on the island to shed some age. My own age-of-choice was my mid-thirties, the age at which my body was still active enough to satisfy my desires, but mellow enough to sit through long hours of creative musing. El and I had decided on the three-day gelbath regimen and had skipped our morning visola to give our cells time to excrete their gatekeepers. But at the last moment, El changed her mind. She decided she ought to grow a little older. So I went to the clinic alone and bathed in the gels twice a day. Billions of molecular smartactives soaked through my skin; permeated my muscles, cartilage, bones, and nerves; politely snip, snip, snipped away protein cross-links and genetic anomalies; and gently flushed away the sludge and detritus of age.

I returned to the bungalow on Wednesday, frisky and bored, and volunteered to prepare it for our regular weekly salon. I had to sift through a backlog of thousands of recorded holos from our friends and associates. More congratulations and confetti for El's appointment. The salon, itself, was a stampede. More people holoed down than our bungalow could accommodate. Its primitive holoserver was overwhelmed by so many simultaneous transmissions, our guests were superimposed over each other five or ten bodies deep, and the whole squirming mass of them flickered around the edges.

Despite the confusion, I quickly sensed that this was a farewell party—for Eleanor. Our friends assumed she would be posted offplanet; all new Tri-D governors were, as all Earth posts were filled. At the same time, no one expected me to go with her—who would? Given people's longevity, it could take decades—or centuries—for Eleanor to acquire enough seniority to be transferred back to Earth. But I replied, each time the subject was broached, "Of course I'm going with her; a husband needs the regular realbody presence of his wife." Lame but true, yet each time I said it I felt sick. I didn't want to leave Earth. I had never wanted to be a colonist. I became constipated at low-*g*. Lifesuits gave me a rash. And would I be able to work? It was true I could holo my Chicago studio anywhere, but if I followed Eleanor out to some galactic rock, would my Muse follow me?

By the time the last guest signed off, we were exhausted. Eleanor got ready for bed, but I poured myself a glass of tea and went out to sit on the beach.

Wet sand. The murmur of the surf. The chilly breeze. It was a lovely equatorial dawn. "Henry," I said, "record this."

Relax, Sam. I always record the best of everything.

"I'm sure you do, Henry."

In the distance, the island's canopy dome shimmered like a veil of rain falling into the sea. The edges of the sea, the waves that surged up the beach to melt away in the sand at my feet, carried the ripe, salty smell of fish and seaweed and whales and lost sailors moldering in the deep. The ocean had proven to be a good delivery medium for molecular nasties, which can float around the globe indefinitely, like particularly rude messages in tiny bottles, until they washed up on someone's—hopefully the enemy's—shore. The island's defense canopy, more a sphere than a dome, extended through the water to the ocean floor, and deep into bedrock.

"So tell me, Henry, how are you and the cabinet getting along?" I had taken his advice, bought him more neural paste, and allowed the protocol games to continue.

The cabinet is a beautiful intelligence. I consider emulating it.

"In what way?"

I may want to bifurcate my personality bud.

"So that there's two of you? Why would you want to do that?"

Then I would be more like you.

"You would? Is that good?"

I believe so. I have recently discovered that I have but one point-of-view, while you have several that you alternate at will.

"It sounds like I bought you more paste than you know what to do with."

I don't think so, Sam. I think my thinking is evolving, but how am I to know?

It was. I recognized the symptoms.

Think of how much more flexible I could be if I could question myself, disagree with myself.

I'd rather not. All I needed was a pair of philosophy students inside my head with their tiresome discourse and untimely epiphanies. Still, I had to be careful how I handled this situation—artificial personalities bruised as easily as organic ones, and they evolved whether or not we gave them permission.

"Henry, couldn't you and I discuss things, you know, like we always have? Couldn't you just ask me the questions?"

No offense, Sam, but you wouldn't be able to keep up.

"Thank you, Henry. I'll think about it and get back to you."

Sam, the calendar secretary is hailing us. How shall I respond?

"Tell her we'll return to the bungalow soon."

Before long, Eleanor walked up the beach. She knelt behind me and massaged my shoulders. "I've been neglecting you," she said, "and you've been wonderful. Can you forgive me?"

"There's nothing to forgive. You're a busy person. I knew that from the start."

"Still, it must be hard." She sat in the sand next to me and wrapped her arms around me. "It's like a drug. I'm drunk with success. But I'll get over it."

"There's no need. You've earned it. Enjoy it."

"You don't want to go offplanet, do you?"

"I'll go anywhere to be with you."

"Yes, I believe you would. Where do men like you come from?"

"From Saturn. We're Saturnian."

She laughed. "I'm sure I could draw a post there if you'd like."

"Wherever." I leaned my head on her shoulder. "I've given up trying to escape you. I surrender."

"Oh? What are your terms of surrender?"

"Treat me fair, don't ever hurt me—or Henry—and don't ever leave me."

"Done."

Not long after our return to our Connecticut townhouse and before El received her posting, we heard some good news. Good for us anyway. Ms. Angie Rickert, Tri-Discipline Governor, posted in Indiana, had been missing for three hours. Eleanor raised her hands to deny any complicity as she told me the news, but she was barely able to stifle her glee. Ms. Rickert had been at her post for fifty-three years.

"But she's only missing," I said.

"For three hours? Come on, Sam, be realistic."

Over the next twenty-four hours, Eleanor's security chief discreetly haunted the high-security nets to feed us details and analyses as they emerged. A militia slug, on routine patrol, found Ms. Rickert's remains in and around a tube car in a low security soybean field outside the Indianapolis canopy. She was the victim of an unidentified molecular antipersonnel smartactive—a nastie. Her belt system, whose primary storage container was seized by the militia and placed under the most sanitary interrogation, claimed that Ms. Rickert was aware of her infection when she entered the tube car outside her Indianapolis apartment.

The belt used Ms. Rickert's top security privileges to jettison the car and its stricken passenger out of the city and out of the tube system itself. So virulent was the attacking nastie and so stubborn Ms. Rickert's visola induced defenses, that in the heat of battle her body burst. Fortunately, it burst within the car and contaminated only two or three square miles of farmland. Ms. Rickert's reliable belt system had prevented a disaster within the Indianapolis canopy. The militia collected her scattered remains, and the coroner declared Ms. Rickert irretrievable.

And so a vacant post in the heartland was up for grabs. Eleanor turned her bedroom into a war room. She sent her entire staff into action. She lined up every chit, every favor, and every piece of dirt she had collected in her long career.

One morning, several sleepless days later, she brought me coffee, a Danish, my morning dose of visola, and a haggard smile. "It's in the bag," she said.

And she was correct. Ten days later, CNN carried a story that the Tri-Discipline Council's newest governor designate, Ms. Eleanor Starke, spouse of noted package designer Sam Harger, had been stationed in Bloomington, Indiana, to replace Ms. Angie Rickert who'd recently died under undisclosed circumstances. A host of pundits and experts debated for days the meaning of such a move and speculated on Eleanor's victory over hundreds of her senior offplanet colleagues for the plum post. Eleanor, as per Tri-D policy, respectfully declined all interviews. In my own interviews, I set the precondition that I be asked only about my own career. When asked if I could pursue my work in Indiana, I could only grin and say, Indiana is not the end of the world. And how had my work been going lately? Miserably, I replied. I am the type of artist that seems to work best while in a state of mild discontent, and lately I'd been riding a streak of great good fortune.

Smug bastard.

We moved into temporary quarters, into an apartment on the 207th floor of the Williams Towers in Bloomington. We planned to eventually purchase a farmstead in an outlying county surrounded by elm groves and rye fields. El's daily schedule, already at marathon levels, only intensified, while I pottered about the campus town trying to figure out why—if I was so lucky—did I feel so apprehensive.

Then the event occurred that dwarfed all that came before it. Eleanor and I, although we'd never applied, were issued a permit to retro-conceive a baby. These permits were impossible to come by, as only about twelve hundred were issued each year in all of North America. We knew no one who'd been issued a permit. I hadn't even seen a baby in realbody for decades (although babies figured prominently in most holovids and comedies). We were so stunned at first we didn't know how to respond.

"Don't worry," said the under secretary of the Population Division, "most recipients have the same reaction. Some faint."

Eleanor said, "I don't see how I could take on the additional responsibility at this time."

The under secretary frowned. "Does that mean you wish to refuse the permit?"

Eleanor blanched. "I didn't say that." She glanced at me, uncharacteristically pleading for help.

I didn't know what to say either. "A boy or a girl?"

"That's entirely up to you, now isn't it?" The under secretary favored us with a fatuous grin. "I'll tell you what." In his voice I heard forced spontaneity; he'd been over this ground many times before, and I wondered if that was the sum total of his job, to call twelve hundred strangers each year and grant them one of life's supreme gifts. "We'll provide background information. When you're ready, call the National Orphanage in Trenton."

For the next hour or so, El and I sat arm-in-arm on the couch in complete silence. Suddenly El began to weep. Tears gushed from her eyes and coursed down her face. She hugged herself—like a lost child, I thought—and fought for breath between sobs. I watched in total amazement. Was this my Eleanor?

After a while, she looked at me, smiled, and said through bubbles of snot, "Well?"

I had to be truthful. "Let's not rush into anything."

She studied me and said, "I agree with you."

"Let's think about it."

"My thought exactly."

At the National Orphanage in Trenton, the last thing they did was take tissue samples for recombination. Eleanor and I sat on chromium stools, side-by-side, in a treatment room as the nurse, a middle-aged jenny, scraped the inside of Eleanor's cheek with a curette. We had both been off visola for forty-eight hours, dangerous but necessary to obtain a pristine DNA sample. Henry informed me that Eleanor's full cabinet was on red alert. Eleanor was tense. This was *coitus mechanicus,* but it was bound to be the most fruitful sex we would ever have.

At the National Orphanage in Trenton, the first thing they did was sit us down in Dr. Deb Armbruster's office to warn us that raising a child today was nothing like it used to be. "Kids used to grow up and go away," said Dr. Armbruster. "Nowadays, they tend to get stuck around age eight and then again at thirteen. And it's not considered good parenting, of course, to force them to age. We think it's all the attention they get. Everyone—your friends, your employer, well-wishing strangers, militia officers—everyone comes to steal a kiss from the baby, to make funny faces at the toddler, to play catch or hoops with the five-year-old. Gifts arrive by the vanload. The media wants to be included in every decision and invited to every birthday party.

"Oh, but you two know how to handle the media, I imagine."

Eleanor and I sat in antique chairs in front of Dr. Armbruster's neatly arranged desk. There was no third chair for Eleanor's chief of staff, who stood patiently next to Eleanor. Dr. Armbruster was a large, fit woman, with a square jaw, rounded nose, and pinpoint eyes that glanced in all directions as she spoke. No doubt she had arranged her belt system in layers of display monitors around the periphery of her vision. Many administrative types did. With the flick of an iris, they could page through reams of reports, graphs, and archives. And they looked down their noses at projected valets with personality buds, like Eleanor's chief of staff.

"So," Dr. Armbruster continued, "you may have a smart-mouthed adolescent on your hands for twenty or thirty years. That, I can assure you, becomes tiresome. And expensive. You, yourselves, could be two or three relationships down the road before the little darling is ready to leave. So we suggest you work out custody now, before you go any further.

"In any case, protectorate law mandates a three-day cooling-off period between this interview and our initiation of the conversion process. You have three days—till Thursday—to change your minds. Think it over."

At the National Orphanage in Trenton, the second thing they did was take us to the storage room to see the chassis that would become our baby.

One wall held a row of carousels, each containing hundreds of small drawers. Dr. Armbruster rotated a carousel and told a particular drawer to unlock itself. She removed from it a small bundle wrapped in a rigid red tetanus blanket (a spin-off of my early work for the National Militia). She placed it on a ceramic gurney, commanded the blanket to relax, and unwrapped it to reveal a near-term human fetus, curled in repose, a miniature thumb stuck in its perfect mouth. It was remarkably lifelike, but rock still, like a figurine. I asked how old it was. Dr. Armbruster said it had been in stasis seven-and-a-half years; it was confiscated in an illegal pregnancy. Developmentally, it was thirty-five weeks old; it had been doused *in utero*. She rotated the fetus—the chassis—on the gurney. "It's normal on every index. We should be able to convert it with no complications." She pointed to this and that part of it and explained the order of rewriting. "The integumentary system—the skin, what you might call our fleshy package," she smiled at me acknowledging my reputation, "is a human's fastest growing organ. A person sheds and replaces it continuously throughout her life. In the conversion process, it's the first one completed. For a fetus, it takes about a week. Hair color, eye color, the liver, the heart, the digestive system convert in two to three weeks. The nervous system, major muscle groups, reproductive organs—three to four weeks. Cartilage and bones—two to three months. Long before its first tooth erupts, the baby is biologically yours."

I asked Dr. Armbruster if I could hold the chassis.

"Certainly," she said with a knowing smile. She placed her large hands carefully under the baby and handed it to me. It was surprisingly heavy, hard, and cold. "The fixative is very dense," she said, "and makes it brittle, like eggshell." I cradled it in my arms awkwardly. Dr. Armbruster said to Eleanor, "They always look like that, afraid they're going to break it. In this case, however, that's entirely possible. And you, my dear, look typically uncomfortable as well."

She was right. Eleanor and her chief of staff stood side-by-side, twins (but for their ages), arms crossed stiffly. Dr. Armbruster said to her, "You might find the next few months immensely more tolerable, enjoyable even, under hormonal therapy. Fathers, it would seem, have always had to learn to bond with their offspring. For you we have something the pharmaceutical companies call 'Mother's Medley.' "

"No, thank you, Doctor," said Eleanor, glaring at her chief of staff, who immediately uncrossed her arms. Eleanor came over to me and I transferred the chassis to her. "Heavy," she said. "And look, it's missing a finger!" One of its tiny fingers was indeed missing, the stub end rough like plaster.

"Don't be concerned," said Dr. Armbruster. "Fingers and toes grow back in days. Just don't break off the head," she laughed.

"Sam, look," Eleanor exclaimed. "Look at this tiny little penis. Isn't it the cutest thing?"

As I looked, something funny happened to me. I had a vivid impression or image, as I do when at work in my studio, in which I saw the chassis, not as a brittle lump of fixed flesh, but as a living, warm, squirming, naked butterball of a baby. And I looked between its chubby legs and saw it was a he, a little guy. He looked up at me, chortled, and waved his tiny fists. Right then I felt a massive piece of my heart shift in my chest. The whole situation finally dawned on me. I was about to become a parent, a *father*. I looked at the chassis and saw my son. Why a son, I couldn't say, but I knew I must have a *son*.

Eleanor touched my arm, "Are you okay?"

"Yes, it's nothing. By the way, that's one piece I hope doesn't chip off."

She laughed, but when she saw that I was serious she said, "We'll have to see about that." She drilled me with her terribly old eyes and said. "About that we'll just have to see."

Back at the Williams Towers in Bloomington, we lay on the balcony in the late afternoon sun and skimmed the queue of messages. Our friends had grown tired of our good fortune: the congratulations were fewer and briefer and seemed, by-and-large, insincere, even tinged with underlying resentment.

And who could blame them? Of all the hundreds of people we knew, none of them had a real child. Many people, it was true, had had children in the old days, before the Population Treaties when babies were considered an ecological nuisance, but that was almost sixty years ago, and sixty years was a long time to live outside the company of children. Probably no one begrudged us our child, although it was obvious to everyone—especially to us—that major strings had been pulled for us at the Department of Health and Human Services. String pulling, itself, did not bother El, but anonymous string-pulling did. She had sent her security chief into the nets, but he was unable to identify our benefactor. El insisted that whoever was responsible was surely not a benefactor, for a baby could hardly be considered a reward. Most likely an enemy, perhaps an off-planet rival she had aced out of the Indianapolis post, which meant the baby was bait in some as yet unsprung plot. Or perhaps the baby was simply a leash her superiors at the Tri-D council had decided to fit her with. In any case, Eleanor was convincing herself she was about to make the worst mistake of her life.

She deleted the remaining queue of messages and turned to me. "Sam, please talk me out of this baby thing." We lay on our balcony halfway up the giant residential tower that ended, in dizzying perspective, near the lower reaches of the canopy. The canopy, invisible during the day, appeared viscous in the evening light, like a transparent gel that a stiff breeze caused to ripple and fold upon itself. In contrast, our tower had a matte surface encrusted with thousands of tiny black bumps. These were the building's resident militia slugs, absorbing the last light of the setting sun to top off their energy stores for a busy night patrolling living rooms and bedrooms.

"You're just nervous," I said to Eleanor.

"I have impeccable instincts."

"Did you ever have children before?"

"Not that it's relevant, but yes, two, a boy and a girl, in my old life. Tom died as a child in an accident. Angie grew up, moved away, married, led a successful career as a journalist, and died at age fifty-four of breast cancer. A long time ago." Eleanor turned over, bare rump to the sky, chin resting on sun-browned arms. "I grieved for each of them forever, and then one day I stopped. All that's left are memories, which are immaterial to this discussion."

"Would you like to have another?"

"Yes, desperately."

"Why 'desperately'?"

She was silent for a while. I watched a slug creep along the underside of the balcony of the apartment above us. "I don't know," she said. "It's funny. I've already been through it all: pregnancy, varicose veins, funerals. I've been through menopause and—worse—back through remenses. I was so tangled up in motherhood, I never knew if I was coming or going. I loved or hated every moment of it, wouldn't have traded it for the world. But when it was all over I felt an unbearable burden lifted from me. Thank god, I said, I won't have to do that again. Yet since the moment we learned of the permit, my arms have been aching to hold a baby. I don't know why. I think it's this schoolgirl body of mine. It's a baby machine, and it intends to force its will on me. I have often observed that you men regard your bodies as large pets, and I've never understood that, till now. I've never felt so removed from myself, from my body.

"But it doesn't have to have its way, does it? I can rise above it. Let's tell them to keep their chassis."

The slug bypassed our balcony, but another slug was making its way slowly down the wall.

I said, "What about this leash theory of yours?"

"I'm sure I'm correct in my assessment. They could get to me by threatening *you*, of course, but they know if it came down to it, I would—no offense—cut you loose."

"No offense taken."

She placed her hand on my cheek. "You know how much I love you. Or maybe you don't know yet. But I'm expendable, Sam, and so are you."

"But not a baby."

"No," she said, "not a baby, not *my* baby. I would do anything to keep my baby safe, and they know it. Let's refuse the permit, Sam. Okay?"

The militia slug had sensed us. It was coming in for a taste. "What about me?" I said. "I might enjoy being a dad. And can you imagine our baby, El? A little critter crawling around our ankles, half you and half me, a little Elsam or Sameanor?"

She closed her eyes and smiled. "That would be a pitiable creature."

"And speaking of ankles," I said, "we're about to be tasted."

The slug, a tiny thing, touched her ankle, attached itself to her for a moment, then dropped off. With the toes of her other foot, Eleanor scratched the tasting site. Slugs only tickled her. With me it was different. There was some nerve tying my ankle directly to my penis, and I found that warm, prickly kiss unavoidably arousing. So, as the slug attached itself to my ankle, El watched mischievously. At that moment, in the glow of the setting sun, in the delicious ache of perfect health, I didn't need the kiss of a slug to arouse me. I needed only a glance from my wife; from her ancient eyes set like opals in her girlish body. This must be how the Greek gods lived on Olympus. This must be the way it was meant to be, to grow ancient and yet to have the strength and appetites of youth. El gasped melodramatically as she watched my penis swell. She turned herself toward me, coyly covering her breasts and pubis with her hands. The slug dropped off me and headed for the balcony wall.

We lay side by side, not yet touching. I was stupid with desire and lost control of my tongue. I spoke without thinking. I said, "Mama."

The word, the single word, "mama," struck her like a physical thing. Her whole body shuddered, and her eyes went wide with surprise. I repeated it, "Mama," and she shut her eyes and turned away from me. I sidled over to her, wrapped my arms around her, and took possession of her ear. I tugged its lobe with my lips. I breathed into it. I pushed her sweat-damp hair clear of it and whispered into it, "I am the papa, and you are the mama." I watched her face, saw a ghost of a smile, and repeated, "Mama."

"Again."

"Maamma, maamma, maamma."

"Crazy papa."

"You are the mama, and mama will give papa a son."

Her eyes flew open at that, fierce, challenging, and amused. "How will papa arrange that, I wonder."

"Like this," I said as I rolled her onto her back and kissed and stroked her. But she was indifferent to me, willfully unresponsive. Nevertheless, I let my tongue play up and down her body. I visited all the sweet spots I had discovered since first we made love, for I knew her body to be my ally. Her body and I wanted the same thing. Soon, with or without El's blessing, her body opened herself to me, and when she was ready, and I was ready, and all my tiny sons inside me were ready, I began to tease her, going in, coming out, going slow, going fast, not going at all, eventually going all in a rush.

Somewhere in the middle of this, a bird, a crow, came crashing to the deck next to us. What I could make out, through the thick envelope that surrounded it, was a mass of shiny black feathers, a broken beak clattering against the deck and a smudge of blood that quickly boiled away. The whole bird, in fact, was being disassembled. Steam rose from the envelope, which emitted a piercing wail of warning. Henry spoke loudly into my ear, *Attention, Sam! In the name of safety, the militia isolation device orders you to move away from it at once.*

We were too excited to pay much mind. The envelope seemed to be doing its job. Nevertheless, we dutifully moved away; we rolled away belly to belly in a teamwork maneuver that was a delight in itself. A partition, ordered by Eleanor's cabinet no doubt, formed to separate us from the unfortunate bird. We were busy making a son and we weren't about to stop until we were through.

Later, when I brought out dinner and two glasses of visola on a tray, El sat at the patio table in her white terry robe looking at the small pile of elemental dust on the deck—carbon, sodium, calcium and whatnot—that had once been a bird. It was not at all unusual for birds to fly through the canopy, or for a tiny percentage of them to become infected outside. What *was* unusual was that, upon reentering the canopy, being tasted, found bad, and enveloped by a swarm of smartactives, so much of the bird should survive the fall in so recognizable a form, as this one had.

El smirked at me and said, "It might be Ms. Rickert, come back to haunt us."

We both laughed uneasily.

The next day I felt the urge to get some work done. It would be another two days before we could give the orphanage the go-ahead, and I was restless. Meanwhile, Eleanor had a task force meeting scheduled in the living room.

I had claimed an empty bedroom in the back for my work area. It about matched my Chicago studio in size and aspect. I had asked the building super, a typically dour reginald, to send up a man to remove all the furniture except for an armchair and a nightstand. The chair needed a pillow to support the small of my back, but otherwise it was adequate for long sitting sessions. I pulled the chair around to face a blank inner wall that Henry had told me was the north wall, placed the nightstand next to it, and brought in a carafe of strong coffee and some sweets from the kitchen. I made myself comfortable.

"Okay, Henry, take me to Chicago." The empty bedroom was instantly transformed into my studio, and I sat in front of my favorite window wall overlooking the Chicago skyline and lakefront from the 303rd floor of the Drexler Building. The sky was dark with storm clouds. Rain splattered against the window. There was nothing like a thunderstorm to stimulate my creativity.

"Henry, match Chicago's ionic dynamics here." As I sipped my coffee and watched lightning strike neighboring towers, the air in my room took on a freshly scrubbed ozone quality. I felt at rest and invigorated.

When I was ready, I turned the chair around to face my studio. It was just as I had left it months ago. There was the large, oak work table that dominated the east corner. Glass-topped and long-legged, it was a table you could work at without bending over. I used to stand at that table endlessly twenty and thirty years ago when I still lived in Chicago. Now it was piled high with prized junk: design trophies, hunks of polished gemstones from Mars and Jupiter, a scale model Japanese pagoda of cardboard and mica, a box full of my antique key collection, parcels wrapped in some of my most successful designs, and—the oldest objects in the room—a mason jar of paint brushes, like a bouquet of dried flowers.

I rose from my chair and wandered about my little domain, taking pleasure in my life's souvenirs. The cabinets, shelves, counters, and floor were as heavily laden as the table: an antelope skin spirit drum; an antique pendulum mantle clock that houseputer servos kept wound; holocubes of some of my former lovers and wives; bits of colored glass, tumbleweed, and driftwood in whose patterns and edges I had once found inspiration; and a whale vertebra used as a footstool. This room was more a museum now than a functional studio, and I was more its curator than a practicing artist.

I went to the south wall and looked into the corner. Henry's original container sat atop three more identical ones. "How's the paste?" I said.

"Sufficient for the time being. I'll let you know when we need more."

"More? This isn't enough? There's enough paste here now to run a major city."

"Eleanor Starke's cabinet is more powerful than a major city."

"Yes, well, let's get down to work." I returned to my armchair. The storm had passed the city and was retreating across the lake, turning the water midnight blue. "What have you got on the egg idea?"

Henry projected a richly ornate egg in the air before me. Gold leaf and silver wire, inlaid with once-precious gems, it was modeled after the Fabergé masterpieces favored by the last of the Romanoff Tsars. But instead of enclosing miniature clockwork automatons, these would be merely expensive wrapping for small gifts. You'd crack them open. You could keep the pieces, which would reassemble, or toss them into the soup bin for recycling credits.

"It's just as I told you last week," said Henry. "The public will hate it. I tested it against Simulated Us, the Donohue Standard, the Person in the Street, and Focus Rental." Henry filled the air around the egg with dynamic charts and graphs. "Nowhere are positive ratings higher than 7 percent, or negative ratings lower than 68 percent. Typical comments call it 'old-fashioned,' and 'vulgar.' Matrix analysis finds that people do not like to be reminded of their latent fertility. People resent . . ."

"Okay, okay," I said. "I get the picture." It was a dumb concept. I knew as much when I proposed it. But I was so enamored by my own soon-to-be-realized fertility, I had lost my head. I thought people would be drawn to this archetypal symbol of renewal, but Henry had been right all along, and now he had the data to prove it.

If the truth be told, I had not come up with a hit design in five years, and I was worried that maybe I never would again.

"It's just a dry spell," said Henry, sensing my mood. "You've had them before, even longer."

"I know, but this one is the worst."

"You say that every time."

To cheer me up, Henry began to play my wrapping paper portfolio, projecting my past masterpieces larger than life in the air.

I held patents for package applications in many fields, from emergency blankets and temporary skin, to military camouflage and video paint.

But my own favorites, and probably the public's as well, were my novelty gift wraps. My first was a video wrapping paper that displayed the faces of loved ones (or celebrities if you had no loved ones) singing "Happy Birthday" to the music of the New York Pops. That dated back to 2025 when I was a molecular engineering student.

My first professional design was the old box-in-a-box routine, only my boxes didn't get smaller as you opened them, but larger, and in fact could fill the whole room until you chanced upon one of the secret commands, which were any variation of "stop" (whoa, enough, cut it out, etc.) or "help" (save me, I'm suffocating, get this thing off me, etc.).

Next came wrapping paper that screamed when you tore or cut it. That led to paper that resembled human skin. It molded itself perfectly and seamlessly (except for a belly button) around the gift and had a shelf life of fourteen days. You had to cut it to open the gift, and of course it bled. We sold mountains of that stuff.

The human skin led to my most enduring design, a perennial that was still common today, the orange peel. It too wrapped itself around any shape seamlessly (and had a navel). It was real, biological orange peel. When you cut or ripped it, it squirted citrus juice and smelled delightful.

I let Henry project these designs for me. I must say I was drunk with my own achievements. I gloried in them. They filled me with the most selfish wonder.

I was terribly good, and the whole world knew it.

Yet even after this healthy dose of self-love, I wasn't able to buckle down to anything new. I told Henry to order the kitchen to fix me some more coffee and some lunch.

On my way to the kitchen I passed the living room and saw that Eleanor was having difficulties of her own. Even with souped-up holoservers, the living room was a mess. There were dozens of people in there and, as best I could tell, just as many rooms superimposed over each other. People, especially important people, liked to bring their offices with them when they went to meetings. The result was a jumble of merging desks, lamps, and chairs. Walls sliced through each other at drunken angles. Windows issued cityscape views of New York, London, Washington, and Moscow (and others I didn't recognize) in various shades of day and weather. People, some of whom I knew from the newsnets, either sat at their desks in a rough, overlapping circle, or wandered through walls and furniture to kibitz with each other and with Eleanor's cabinet.

At least this is how it all appeared to me standing in the hallway, outside the room's holo anchors. To those inside, it might look like the Senate chambers. I watched for a while, safely out of holo range, until Eleanor noticed me. "Henry," I said, "ask her how many of these people are here in realbody." Eleanor raised a finger, one, and pointed to herself.

I smiled. She was the only one there who could see me. I continued to the kitchen and brought my lunch back to my studio. I still couldn't get started, so I asked Henry to report on my correspondence. He had answered over five-hundred posts since our last session the previous week. Four-fifths of these concerned the baby. We were invited to appear—*with the baby*—on every major talk show and magazine. We were threatened with lawsuits by the Anti-Transubstantiation League. We were threatened with violence by several anonymous callers (who would surely be identified by El's security chief and prosecuted by her attorney general). A hundred seemingly ordinary people requested permission to visit us in realbody or holo during nap time, bath time, any time. Twice that number accused us of elitism. Three men and one woman named Sam Harger claimed that their fertility permit was mistakenly awarded to me. Dr. Armbruster's prediction was coming true and the baby hadn't even been converted yet.

This killed an hour. I still didn't feel creative, so I called it quits. I took a shower, shaved. Then I went, naked, to stand outside the entrance to the living room. When Eleanor saw me, her eyes went big, and she laughed. She held up five fingers, five minutes, and turned back to her meeting.

I went to my bedroom to wait for her. She spent her lunch break with me. When we made love that day and the next, I enjoyed a little fantasy I never told her about. I imagined that she was pregnant in the old-fashioned way, that her belly was enormous, melon-round and hard, and that as I moved inside her, as we moved together, we were teaching our son his first lesson in the art of human love.

On Thursday, the day of the conversion, we took a leisurely breakfast on the terrace of the New Foursquare Hotel in downtown Bloomington. A river of pedestrians, students and service people mostly, flowed past our little island of metal tables and brightly striped umbrellas. The day broke clear and blue and would be hot by noon. A gentle breeze tried to snatch away our menus. The Foursquare had the best kitchen in Bloomington, at least for desserts. Its pastry chef, Mr. Duvou, had built a reputation for the classics. That morning we (mostly me) were enjoying strawberry shortcake with whipped cream and coffee. Everything—the strawberries, the wheat for the cakes, the sugar, coffee beans, and cream—was grown, not assembled. The preparation was done lovingly and skillfully by hand. All the waitstaff were steves, who were highly sensitive to our wants and who, despite their ungainly height, bowed ever so low to take our order.

I moistened my finger with my tongue and made temporary anchor points where I touched the table and umbrella pole. We called Dr. Armbruster. She appeared in miniature, desk and all, on my place mat.

"It's a go, then?" she said.

"Yes," I said.

"Yes," said Eleanor, who took my hand.

"Congratulations, both of you. You are two of the luckiest people in the world."

We already knew that.

"Traits? Enhancements?" asked Dr. Armbruster.

We had studied all the options and decided to allow Nature and chance, not some well-meaning engineer, to roll our genes together into a new individual. "Random traits," we said, "and standard enhancements."

"That leaves gender," said Dr. Armbruster.

I looked at Eleanor, who smiled. "A boy," she said. "It definitely wants to be a boy."

"A boy it is," said Dr. Armbruster. "I'll get the lab on it immediately. The recombination should take about three hours. I'll monitor the progress and keep you apprised. We will infect the chassis around noon. Make an appointment for a week from today to come in and take possession of . . . your son. We like to throw a little birthing party. It's up to you to make media arrangements, if any.

"I'll call you in about an hour. And congratulations again!"

We were too nervous to do anything else, so we ate shortcake and drank coffee and didn't talk much. We mostly sat close and said meaningless things to ease the tension. Finally Dr. Armbruster, seated at her tiny desk, called back.

"The recombination work is about two-thirds done and is proceeding very smoothly. Early readings show a Pernell Organic Intelligence quotient of 3.93—very impressive, but probably no surprise to you. So far, we know that your son has Sam's eyes, chin, and skeleto-muscular frame, and Eleanor's hair, nose, and . . . eyebrows."

"I'm afraid my eyebrows are fairly dominant," said Eleanor.

"Apparently," said Dr. Armbruster.

"I'm mad about your eyebrows," I said.

"And I'm mad about your frame," Eleanor said.

We spent another hour there, taking two more updates from Dr. Armbruster. I ordered an iced bottle of champagne, and guests from other tables toasted us with coffee cups and visola glasses. I was slightly tipsy when we finally rose to leave. To my annoyance, I felt the prickly kiss of a militia slug at my ankle. I decided I'd better let it finish tasting me before I attempted to thread my way through the jumble of tables and chairs. The slug seemed to take an unusual length of time.

Eleanor, meanwhile, was impatient to go. "What is it?" she laughed. "Are you drunk?"

"Just a slug," I said. "It's almost done." But it wasn't. Instead of dropping off, it elongated itself and looped around both of my ankles so that when I turned to join Eleanor, I tripped and fell into our table, which crashed into a neighboring one.

Everything happened at once. As I fell, the slippery shroud of an isolation envelope snaked up my body to my face and sealed itself above my head. But it did not cushion my fall; I banged my nose on the flagstone. Everything grew dim as the envelope coalesced, so that I could barely make out the tables and umbrellas and the crowd of people running past me like horror-show shadows. There was Eleanor's face, momentarily, peering in at me, and then gone. "Don't go!" I shouted. "Eleanor, help!" But she melted into the crowd on the pedway. I tried to get up, to crawl, but my arms and legs were tightly bound.

Henry said, *Sam, I'm being probed, and I've lost contact with Eleanor's system.*

"What's going on?" I screamed. "Tell them to make it stop." I, too, was being probed. At first my skin tingled as in a gelbath at a juve clinic. But these smartactives weren't polite and weren't about to take a leisurely three days to inspect my cells. They wanted in right away; they streamed through my pores, down my nasal passage and throat, up my urethra and anus and spread out to capture all of my organs. My skin burned. My heart stammered. My stomach clamped and sent a geyser of pink shortcake mush and champagne-curdled cream back up my throat. But with the envelope stretched across my face, there was nowhere for the vomit to go except as a thin layer down my throat and chest. The envelope treated it as organic matter attempting escape and quickly disassembled it, scalding me with the heat of its activity. I rolled frantically about trying to lessen the pain, blindly upsetting more tables. Shards of glass cut me without cutting the envelope, so thin it stretched, and my blood leaked from me and simmered away next to my skin.

Fernando Boa, said someone in Henry's voice in Spanish. *You are hereby placed under arrest for unlawful escape and flight from State of Oaxaca authorities. Do not resist. Any attempt to resist will result in your immediate execution.*

"My name is not Boa," I cried through a swollen throat. "It's Harger, Sam Harger!"

I squeezed my eyelids tight against the pain, but the actives cut right through them, coating my eyeballs and penetrating them to taste the vitreous humor inside. Brilliant flashes and explosions of light burst across my retinae as each rod and cone was inspected, and a dull, hurricane roar filled my head.

Henry shouted, *Shall I resist? I think I should resist.*

"NO!" I answered. "No, Henry!"

The real agony began then, as all up and down my body, my nerve cells were invaded. Attached to every muscle fiber, every blood vessel, every hair follicle, embedded in my skin, my joints, my intestines, they all began to fire at once. My brain rattled in my skull. My guts twisted inside out. I begged for unconsciousness.

Then, just as suddenly, the convulsions ceased, the trillions of engines inside me abruptly quit. *I can do this,* Henry said. *I know how.*

"No, Henry," I croaked.

The envelope itself flickered, then fell from me like so much dust. I was in daylight and fresh air again. Soiled, bleeding, beat-up, and bloated, but whole. I was alone on a battlefield of smashed umbrellas and china shrapnel. I thought maybe I should crawl away from the envelope's dust, but the slug still shackled my ankles. "You shouldn't have done it, Henry," I said. "They won't like what you did."

Without warning, the neural storm slammed me again, worse than before. A new envelope issued from the slug. This one squeezed me, like a tube of oil paint, starting at my feet, crushing the bones and working up my legs.

"Please," I begged, "let me pass out."

I didn't pass out, but I went somewhere else, to another room, where I could still hear the storm raging on the other side of a thin wall. There was someone else in the room, a man I halfway recognized. He was well-muscled and of middle height, and his yellow hair was streaked with white. He wore the warmest of smiles on his coarse, round face.

"Don't worry," he said, referring to the storm beyond the wall, "it'll pass."

He had Henry's voice.

"You should have listened to me, Henry," I scolded. "Where did you learn to disobey me?"

"I know I don't count all that much," said the man. "I mean, I'm just a construct, not a living being. A servant, not a coequal. But I want to tell you how good it's been to know you."

I awoke lying on my side on a gurney in a ceramic room, my cheek resting in a small puddle of clear fluid. I was naked. Every cell of me ached. A man in a militia uniform, a jerry, watched me sullenly. When I sat up, dizzy, nauseous, he held out a bundle of clean clothes. Not my clothes.

"Wha' happe' me?" My lips and tongue were twice their size.

"You had an unfortunate accident."

"Assiden'?"

The jerry pressed the clothes into my hands. "Just shut up and get dressed." He resumed his post next to the door and watched me fumble with the clothes. My feet were so swollen I could hardly pull the pants legs over them. My hands trembled and could not grip. I could not keep my vision focused, and my head pulsed with pain. But all in all, I felt much better than I had a little while ago.

When, after what seemed like hours, I was dressed, the jerry said, "Captain wants to see ya."

I followed him down deserted ceramic corridors to a small office where sat a large, handsome young man in a neat blue uniform. "Sign here," he said, pushing a slate at me. "It's your terms of release."

Read this, Henry, I tongued with a bruised tongue. When Henry didn't answer I felt the pull of panic until I remembered that the slave processors inside my body that connected me to Henry's box in Chicago had certainly been destroyed. So I tried to read the document myself. It was loaded with legalese and interminable clauses, but I was able to glean from it that by signing it, I was forever releasing the National Militia from all liability for whatever treatment I had enjoyed at their hands.

"I will not sign this," I said.

"Suit yourself," said the captain, who took the slate from my hands. "You are hereby released from custody, but you remain on probation until further notice. Ask the belt for details." He pointed to the belt holding up my borrowed trousers.

I lifted my shirt and looked at the belt. The device stitched to it was so small I had missed it, and its ports were disguised as grommets.

"Sergeant," the Captain said to the jerry, "show Mr. Harger the door."

"Just like that?" I said.

"What do you want, a prize?"

It was dark out. I asked the belt they'd given me for the time, and it said in a flat, neuter voice, "The time is seven forty-nine and thirty-two seconds." I calculated I had been incarcerated—and unconscious—for about seven hours. On a hunch, I asked what day it was. "The date is Friday, 6 April 2092."

Friday. I had been out for a day and seven hours.

There was a tube station right outside the cop shop, naturally, and I managed to find a private car. I climbed in and eased my aching self into the cushioned seat. I considered calling Eleanor, but not with that belt. So I told it to take me home. It replied, "Address please."

My anger flared and I snapped, "The Williams Towers, stupid."

"City and state, please."

I was too tired for this. "Bloomington!"

"Bloomington in California, Idaho, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Maryland, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, New York . . ."

"Hold it! Wait! Enough! Where the hell am I?"

"You're at the Western Regional Militia Headquarters, Utah."

How I longed for my Henry. He'd get me home safe with no hassle. He'd take care of me. "Bloomington," I said mildly, "Indiana."

The doors locked, the running lights came on, and the car rolled to the injection ramp. We coasted down, past the local grid, to the intercontinental tubes. The belt said, "Your travel time to the Williams Towers in Bloomington, Indiana, will be one hour, fifty-five minutes." When the car entered the slipstream, I was shoved against the seat by the force of acceleration. Henry would have known how sore I was and shunted us to the long ramp. Fortunately, I had a spare Henry belt in the apartment, so I wouldn't have to be without him for long. And after a few days, when I felt better, I'd again reinstall him inbody.

I tried to nap, but was too sick. My head kept swimming, and I had to keep my eyes open, or I would have vomited.

It was after 10:00 P.M. when I arrived under the Williams Towers, but the station was crowded with residents and guests. I felt everyone's eyes on me. Surely everyone knew of my arrest. They would have watched it on the nets, witnessed my naked fear as the shroud raced up my chest and face.

I walked briskly, looking straight ahead, to the row of elevators. I managed to claim one for myself, and as the doors closed I felt relief. But something was wrong; we weren't moving.

"Floor please," said my new belt in its bland voice.

"Fuck you!" I screamed. "Fuck you fuck you fuck you! Listen to me, you piece of shit, and see if you can get this right. I want you to call Henry, that's my system. Shake hands with him. Put him in charge of all of your miserable functions. Do you hear me?"

"Certainly, sir. What is the Henry access code?"

"Code? Code? I don't know code." That kind of detail had been Henry's job for over eighty years. I had stopped memorizing codes and ID numbers and addresses, anniversaries and birthdates long ago. "Just take me up! We'll stop at every floor above 200!" I shouted. "Wait. Hold it. Open the doors." I had the sudden, urgent need to urinate. I didn't think I could hold it long enough to reach the apartment, especially with the added pressure from the high-speed lift.

There were people waiting outside the elevator doors. I was sure they had heard me shouting. I stepped through them, a sick smile plastered to my face, the sweat rolling down my forehead, and I hurried to the men's room off the lobby.

I had to go so bad, that when I stood before the urinal and tried, I couldn't. I felt about to burst, but I was plugged up. I had to consciously calm myself, breathe deeply, relax. The stream, when it finally emerged, seemed to issue forever. How many quarts could my bladder hold? The urine was viscous and cloudy with a dull metallic sheen, as though mixed with aluminum dust. Whatever the militia had pumped into me would take days to excrete. At least there was no sign of bleeding, thank God. But it burned. And when I was finished and about to leave the rest room, I felt I had to go again.

Up on my floor, my belt valet couldn't open the door to the apartment, so I had to ask admittance. The door didn't recognize me, but Eleanor's cabinet gave it permission to open. The apartment smelled of strong disinfectant. "Eleanor, are you home?" It suddenly occurred to me that she might not be.

"In here," called Eleanor. I hurried to the living room, but Eleanor wasn't there. It was her sterile elder twin, her chief of staff, who sat on the couch. She was flanked by the attorney general, dressed in black, and the security chief, grinning his wolfish grin.

"What the hell is this," I said, "a fucking cabinet meeting? Where's Eleanor?"

In a businesslike manner, the chief of staff motioned to the armchair opposite the couch, "Won't you please join us, Sam. We have much to discuss."

"Discuss it among yourselves," I yelled. "Where's Eleanor?" Now I was sure that she was gone. She had bolted from the cafe and kept going; she had left her three stooges behind to break the bad news to me.

"Eleanor's in her bedroom, but she . . ."

I didn't wait. I ran down the hallway. But the bedroom door was locked. "Door," I shouted, "unlock yourself."

"Access," replied the door, "has been extended to apartment residents only."

"That includes me, you idiot." I pounded the door with my fists. "Eleanor, let me in. It's me—Sam."

No reply.

I returned to the living room. "What the fuck is going on here?"

"Sam," said the elderly chief of staff, "Eleanor will see you in a few minutes, but not before . . ."

"Eleanor!" I yelled, turning around to look at each of the room's holoeyes. "I know you're watching. Come out; we need to talk. I want you, not these dummies."

"Sam," said Eleanor behind me. But it wasn't Eleanor. Again I was fooled by her chief of staff who had crossed her arms like an angry El and bunched her eyebrows in an angry scowl. She mimicked my Eleanor so perfectly, I had to wonder if it wasn't El as a morphed holo. "Sam, please get a grip and sit down. We need to discuss your accident."

"My what? My accident? That's the same word the militia used. Well, it was no accident! It was an assault, a rape, a vicious attack. Not an accident!"

"Excuse me," said Eleanor's attorney general, "but we were using the word 'accident' in its legal sense. Both sides have provisionally agreed . . ."

I left the room without a word. I needed urgently to urinate again. Mercifully, the bathroom door opened to me. I knew I was behaving terribly, but I couldn't help myself. On the one hand I was relieved and grateful that Eleanor was there, that she hadn't left me—yet. On the other hand, I was hurting and confused and angry. All I wanted was to hold her, be held by her. I needed her at that moment more than I had ever needed anyone in my life. I had no time for holos. But, it was reasonable that she should be frightened. Maybe she thought I was infectious. My behavior was doing nothing to reassure her. I had to control myself.

My urine burned even more than before. My mouth was cotton dry. I grabbed a glass and filled it with tap water. Surprised at how thirsty I was, I drank glassful after glassful. I washed my face in the sink. The cool water felt so good, I stripped off my militia-issue clothes and stepped into the shower. The water revived me, fortified me. Not wanting to put the clothes back on, I wrapped a towel around myself, went out, and told the holos to ask Eleanor to toss out some of my clothes for me. I promised I wouldn't try to force my way into the bedroom when she opened the door.

"All your clothes were confiscated by the militia," said the chief of staff, "but Fred will bring you something of his."

Before I could ask who Fred was, a big, squat-bodied russ came out of the back bedroom, the room I used for my trips to Chicago. He was dressed in a conservative business suit and carried a brown velvet robe over his arm.

"This is Fred," said the chief of staff. "Fred has been assigned to . . ."

"What?" I shouted. "El's afraid I'm going to throttle her holos? She thinks I would break down that door?"

"Eleanor thinks nothing of the kind," said the chief of staff. "Fred has been assigned by the Tri-Discipline Board."

"Well, I don't want him here. Send him away."

"I'm afraid," said the chief of staff, "that as long as Eleanor remains a governor, Fred stays. Neither she nor you have any say in the matter."

The russ, Fred, held out the robe to me, but I refused it, and said, "Just stay out of my way, Fred." I went to the bathroom and found one of Eleanor's terry robes in the linen closet. It was tight on me, but it would do.

Returning to the living room, I sat in the armchair facing the cabinet's couch. "Okay, what do you want?"

"That's more like it," said the chief of staff. "First, let's get you caught up on what's happened so far."

"By all means. Catch me up."

The chief of staff glanced at the attorney general who said, "Yesterday morning, Thursday, 5 April, at precisely 10:47:39, while loitering at the New Foursquare Cafe in downtown Bloomington, Indiana, you, Samson P. Harger, were routinely analyzed by a National Militia Random Testing Device, Metro Population Model 8903AL. You were found to be in noncompliance with the Sabotage and Espionage Acts of 2036, 2038, 2050, and 2090. As per procedures set forth in . . ."

"Please," I said, "in English."

The security chief said in his gravelly voice, "You were tasted by a slug, Mr. Harger, and found bad, real bad. So they bagged you."

"What was wrong with me?"

"Name it. You went off the scale. First, the DNA sequence in a sample of ten of your skin cells didn't match each other. Also, a known nastie was identified in your blood. Your marker genes didn't match your record in the National Registry. You *did* match the record of a known terrorist with an outstanding arrest warrant. You also matched the record of someone who died twenty-three years ago."

"That's ridiculous," I said. "How could the slug read all those things at once?"

"That's what the militia wanted to know. So they disassembled you."

"They! What?"

"Any one of those conditions gave them the authority they needed. They didn't have the patience to read you slow and gentle like, so they pumped you so full of smartactives you filled a swimming pool."

"They. Completely?"

"All your biological functions were interrupted. You were legally dead for three minutes."

It took me a moment to grasp what he was saying. "So what did they discover?"

"Nothing," said the security chief, "zip, nada. Your cell survey came up normal. They couldn't even get the arresting slug, nor any other slug, to duplicate the initial readings."

"So the arresting slug was defective?"

"We've forced them to concede that the arresting slug may have been defective."

"So they reassembled me and let me go, and everything is okay?"

"Not quite. That particular model slug has never been implicated in a false reading. This would be the first time, according to the militia, and naturally they're not eager to admit that. Besides, they still had you on another serious charge."

"Which is?"

"That your initial reading constituted an unexplained anomaly."

"An unexplained anomaly? This is a crime?"

I excused myself for another visit to the bathroom. The urgency increased when I stood up from the armchair and was painful by the time I reached the toilet. This time the stream didn't burn me, but hissed and gave off some sort of vapor, like steam. I watched in horror as my situation became clear to me.

I marched back to the living room, stood in front of the three holos, rolled up a sleeve, and scratched and rubbed my arm, scraping off flakes of skin which cascaded to the floor, popping and flashing like a miniature fireworks display. "I've been seared!" I screamed at them. "You let them sear me!"

"Sit down," said the chief of staff. "Unfortunately, there's more."

I sat down, still holding my arm out. Beads of sweat dropped from my chin and boiled away on the robe in little puffs of steam.

"Eleanor feels it best to tell you everything now," said the chief of staff. "It's not pretty, so sit back and prepare yourself for more bad news."

I did as she suggested.

"They weren't about to let you go, you know. You had forfeited all of your civil rights. If you weren't the spouse of a Tri-Discipline Governor, you'd have simply disappeared. As it was, they proceeded to eradicate all traces of your DNA from the environment. They flooded this apartment first, removed every bit of hair, phlegm, mucous, skin, fingernail, toenail, semen, and blood that you have shed or deposited since moving in. They sent probes down the plumbing for trapped hair. They subjected Eleanor to a complete body douche. They scoured the halls, elevators, lobby, dining room, linen stores, laundry. They were most thorough. They have likewise visited your townhouse in Connecticut, the bungalow in Cozumel, the juve clinic, your hotel room on the Moon, the shuttle, and all your and Eleanor's domiciles all over the Protectorate. They are systematically following your trail backward for a period of thirty years."

"My Chicago studio?"

"Of course."

"Henry?"

"Gone."

"You mean in isolation, right? They're interrogating him, right?"

The security chief said, "No, eradicated. He resisted. Gave 'em quite a fight, too. But no civilian job can withstand the weight of the National Militia. Not even us."

I didn't believe Henry was gone. He had so many secret backups. At this moment he was probably laying low in a half dozen parking loops all over the solar system.

But another thought occurred to me. "My son!"

The chief of staff said, "When your accident occurred, the chassis had not yet been infected with your and Eleanor's recombinant. Had it been, the militia would have disassembled it too. Eleanor prevented the procedure at the last moment and turned over all genetic records and material."

I tried sifting through this. My son was dead, or rather, never started. But at least Eleanor had saved the chassis. We could always try—no we couldn't. *I was seared!* My cells were locked. Any attempt to read or overwrite any of my cells would cause those cells to fry.

The attorney general said, "The chassis, however, had already been brought out of stasis and was considered viable. To allow it to develop with its original genetic complement, or to place it back into stasis, would have exposed it to legal claims by its progenitors. So Eleanor had it infected. It's undergoing conversion at this moment."

"Infected? Infected with what? Did she clone herself?"

The chief of staff laughed, "Heavens, no. She had it infected with the recombination of her genes and those of a simulated partner, a composite of several of her past consorts."

"Without my agreement?"

"You were deceased at the time. She was your surviving spouse."

"I was deceased for only three minutes! I was retrievably dead. Obviously, retrievable!"

"Alive you would have been a felon, and the fertility permit would have been annulled."

I closed my eyes and leaned back into the chair. "Okay," I said, "what else?" When no one answered, I said, "To sum up then, I have been seared, which means my genes are booby trapped. Which means I'm incapable of reproducing, or even of being rejuvenated. So my life expectancy has been reduced to . . . what? . . . another hundred years or so? Okay. My son is dead. Pulled apart before he was even started. Henry is gone, probably forever. My wife—no, my widow—is having a child by another man—men."

"Women actually," said the chief of staff.

"Whatever. Not by me. How long did all of this take?"

"About twenty minutes."

"A hell of a busy twenty minutes."

"To our way of thinking," said the attorney general, "a protracted interval of time. The important negotiation in your case occurred within the first five seconds of your demise."

"You're telling me that Eleanor was able to figure everything out and cook up her simulated partner in five seconds?"

"Eleanor has in readiness at all times a full set of contingency plans to cover every conceivable threat we can imagine. It pays, Mr. Harger, to plan for the worst."

"I guess it does." The idea that all during our time together, El was busy making these plans was too monstrous to believe. "So tell me about these negotiations."

"First, let me impress upon you," said the chief of staff, "the fact that Eleanor stuck by you. Few other Tri-Discipline officers would take such risks to fight for a spouse. Also, only someone in her position could have successfully prosecuted your case. The militia doesn't have to answer phone calls, you know.

"As to the details, the attorney general can fill you in later, but here's the agreement in a nutshell. Given the wild diagnosis of the arresting slug and the subsequent lack of substantiating evidence, we calculated the most probable cause to be a defect in the slug, not some as yet unheard of nastie in your body. Further, as a perfect system of any sort has never been demonstrated, we predicted there to be records of other failures buried deep in militia archives. Eleanor threatened to air these files publicly in a civil suit. To do so would have cost her a lifetime of political capital, her career, and possibly her life. But as she was able to convince the militia she was willing to proceed, they backed down. They agreed to revive you and place you on probation, the terms of which are stored in your belt system, which we see you have not yet reviewed. The major term is your searing. Searing effectively neutralizes the threat in case you *are* the victim of a new nastie. Also, as a sign of good faith, we disclosed the locations of all of Henry's hidy-holes."

"What?" I rose from my seat. "You gave them Henry?"

"Sit down, Mr. Harger," said the security chief.

But I didn't sit down. I began to pace. So this is how it works, I thought. This is the world I live in.

"Please realize, Sam," said the chief of staff, "they would have found him out anyway. No matter how clever you think you are, given time, all veils can be pierced."

I turned around to answer her, but she and her two colleagues were gone. I was alone in the room with the russ, Fred, who stood sheepishly next to the hall corridor. He cleared his throat and said, "Governor Starke will see you now."

II

It's been eight long months since my surprise visit to the cop shop. I've had plenty of time to sit and reflect on what's happened to me, to meditate on my victimhood.

Shortly after my accident, Eleanor and I moved into our new home, a sprawling old farmstead on the outskirts of Bloomington. We have more than enough room here, with barns and stables, a large garden, apple and pear orchards, tennis courts, swimming pool, and a dozen service people to run everything. It's really very beautiful, and the whole eighty acres is covered with its own canopy, inside and independent of the Bloomington canopy, a bubble inside a bubble. Just the place to raise the child of a Tri-Discipline governor.

The main house, built of blocks of local limestone, dates back to the last century. It's the home that Eleanor and I dreamed of owning. But now that we're here, I spend most of my time in the basement, for sunlight is hard on my seared skin. For that matter, rich food is hard on my gut, I bruise easily inside and out, I can't sleep a whole night through, all my joints ache for an hour or so when I rise, I have lost my sense of smell, and I've become hard of hearing. There is a constant taste of brass in my mouth and a dull throbbing in my skull. I go to bed nauseated and wake up nauseated. The doctor says my condition will improve in time as my body adjusts, but that my health is up to me now. No longer do I have resident molecular homeostats to constantly screen, flush and scrub my cells, nor muscle toners or fat inhibitors. No longer can I go periodically to a juve clinic to correct the cellular errors of aging. Now I can and certainly will grow stouter, slower, weaker, balder, and older. Now the date of my death is decades, not millennia, away. This should come as no great shock, for this was the human condition when I was born. Yet, since my birth, the whole human race, it seems, has boarded a giant ocean liner and set sail for the shores of immortality. I, however, have been unceremoniously tossed overboard.

So I spend my days sitting in the dim dampness of my basement corner, growing pasty white and fat (twenty pounds already), and plucking my eyebrows to watch them sizzle like fuses.

I am not pouting, and I am certainly not indulging in self-pity, as Eleanor accuses me. In fact, I am brooding. It's what artists do, we brood. To other, more active people, we appear selfish, obsessive, even narcissistic, which is why we prefer to brood in private.

But I'm not brooding about art or package design. I have quit that for good. I will never design again. That much I know. I'm not sure what I *will* do, but at least I know I've finished that part of my life. It was good; I enjoyed it. I climbed to the top of my field. But it's over.

I am brooding about my victimhood. My intuition tells me that if I understand it, I will know what to do with myself. So I pluck another eyebrow hair. The tiny bulb of muscle at the root ignites like an old fashioned match, a tiny point of light in my dark cave and, as though making a wish, I whisper, "Henry." The hair sizzles along its length until it burns my fingers, and I have to drop it. My fingertips are already charred from this game.

I miss Henry terribly. It's as though a whole chunk of my mind were missing. I never knew how deeply integrated I had woven him into my psyche, or where my thoughts stopped and his started. When I ask myself a question these days, no one answers.

I wonder why he did it, what made him think he could resist the militia. Can machine intelligence become cocky? Or did he knowingly sacrifice himself for me? Did he think he could help me escape? Or did he protect our privacy in the only way open to him, by destroying himself? The living archive of my life is gone, but at least it's not in the loving hands of the militia.

My little death has caused other headaches. My marriage ended. My estate went into receivership. My memberships, accounts and privileges in hundreds of services and organizations were closed. News of my death spread around the globe at the speed of light, causing tens of thousands of data banks to toggle my status to "deceased," a position not designed to toggle back. Autobituaries, complete with footage of my mulching at the Foursquare Cafe, appeared on all the nets the same day. Every reference to me records both my dates of birth and death. (Interestingly, none of my obits or bio's mention the fact that I was seared.) Whenever I try to use my voiceprint to pay a bill, alarms go off. El's attorney general has managed to reinstate most of my major accounts, but my demise is too firmly entrenched in the world's web to ever be fully corrected. The attorney general has, in fact, offered me a routine for my belt system to pursue these corrections on a continuous basis. She, as well as the rest of El's cabinet, has volunteered to educate my belt for me as soon as I install a personality bud in it. It will need a bud if I ever intend to leave the security of my dungeon. But I'm not ready for a new belt buddy.

I pluck another eyebrow hair, and by its tiny light I say, "Ellen."

We are living in an armed fortress. Eleanor says we can survive any form of attack here: conventional, nuclear, or molecular. She feels completely at ease here. This is where she comes to rest at the end of a long day, to glory in her patch of Earth, to adore her baby, Ellen. Even without the help of Mother's Medley, Eleanor's maternal instincts have all kicked in. She is mad with motherhood. Ellen is ever in her thoughts. If she could, El would spend all her time in the nursery in realbody, but the duties of a Tri-D governor call her away. So she has programmed a realtime holo of Ellen to be visible continuously in the periphery of her vision, a private scene only she can see. No longer do the endless meetings and unavoidable luncheons capture her full attention. No longer is time spent in a tube car flitting from one corner of the Protectorate to another a total waste. Now she secretly watches the jennies feed the baby, bathe the baby, perambulate the baby around the duck pond. And she is always interfering with the jennies, correcting them, undercutting whatever place they may have won in the baby's affection. There are four jennies. Without the namebadges on their identical uniforms, I wouldn't be able to tell them apart. They have overlapping twelve-hour shifts, and they hand the baby off like a baton in a relay race.

I have my own retinue, a contingent of four russes: Fred, the one who showed up on the day of my little death, and three more. I am not a prisoner here, and their mission is to protect the compound, Governor Starke, and her infant daughter, not to watch me, but I have noticed that there is always one within striking distance, especially when I go near the nursery. Which I don't do very often. Ellen is a beautiful baby, but I have no desire to spend time with her, and the whole house seems to breathe easier when I stay down in my tomb.

Yesterday evening a jenny came down to announce dinner. I threw on some clothes and joined El in the solarium off the kitchen where lately she prefers to take all her meals. Outside the window wall, heavy snowflakes fell silently in the blue-grey dusk. El was watching Ellen explore a new toy on the carpet. When she turned to me, her face was radiant, but I had no radiance to return. Nevertheless, she took my hand and drew me to sit next to her.

"Here's Daddy," she cooed, and Ellen warbled a happy greeting. I knew what was expected of me. I was supposed to adore the baby, gaze upon her plenitude and thus be filled with grace. I tried. I tried because I truly want everything to work out, because I love Eleanor and wish to be her partner in parenthood. So I watched Ellen and meditated on the marvel and mystery of life. El and I are no longer at the tail end of the long chain of humanity—I told myself—flapping in the cold winds of evolution. Now we are grounded. We have forged a new link. We are no longer grasped only by the past, but we grasp the future. We have created the future in flesh.

When El turned again to me, I was ready, or thought I was. But she saw right through me to my stubborn core of indifference. Nevertheless, she encouraged me, prompted me with, "Isn't she beautiful?"

"Oh, yes," I replied.

"And smart."

"The smartest."

Later that evening, when the brilliant monstrance of her new religion was safely tucked away in the nursery under the sleepless eyes of the night jennies, Eleanor rebuked me. "Are you so selfish that you can't accept Ellen as your daughter? Does it have to be your seed or nothing? I know what happened to you was shitty and unfair, and I'm sorry. I really am. I wish to hell the slug got me instead. I don't know why it missed me. Maybe the next one will be more accurate. Will that make you happy?"

"No, El, don't talk like that. I can't help it. Give me time."

Eleanor reached over and put an arm around me. "I'm sorry," she said. "Forgive me. It's just that I want us to be happy, and I feel so guilty."

"Don't feel guilty. It's not your fault. I knew the risk involved in being with you. I'm an adult. I can adapt. And I do love Ellen. Before long she'll have her daddy wrapped around her little finger."

Eleanor was skeptical, but she wanted so much to believe me. That night she invited herself to my bedroom. We used to have an exceptional sex life. Sex for us was a form of play, competition, and truth-telling. It used to be fun. Now it's a job. The shaft of my penis is bruised by the normal bend and torque of even moderate lovemaking. My urethra is raw from the jets of scalding semen when I come. Of course I use special condoms and lubricants for the seared, without which I would blister El's vagina, but it's still not comfortable for either of us. El tries to downplay her discomfort by saying things like, "You're hot, baby," but she can't fool me. When we made love that night, I pulled out before ejaculating. El tried to draw me back inside, but I wouldn't go. She took my sheathed penis in her hands, but I said not to bother. I hadn't felt the need for a long time.

In the middle of the night, when I rose to go to my dungeon, Eleanor stirred and whispered, "Hate me if you must, but please don't blame the baby."

I ask my new belt how many eyebrow hairs an average person of my race, sex, and age has. The belt can access numerous encyclopedias to do simple research like this. *Five hundred fifty in each eyebrow,* it replies in its neuter voice. That's one thousand one hundred altogether, plenty of fuel to light my investigation. I pluck another and say, "Fred."

For Fred is a complete surprise to me. I had never formed a relationship with a clone before. They are service people. They are interchangeable. They wait on us in stores and restaurants. They clip our hair. They perform the menialities we cannot, or prefer not, to assign to machines. How can you tell one joan or jerome from another anyway? And what could you possibly talk about? Nice watering can you have there, kelly. What's the weather like up there, steve?

But Fred is different. From the start he's brought me fruit and cakes reputed to fortify tender digestive tracts, sunglasses, soothing skin creams, and a hat with a duckbill visor. He seems genuinely interested in me, even comes down to chat after his shift. I don't know why he's so generous. Perhaps he never recovered from the shock of first meeting me, freshly seared and implacably aggrieved. Perhaps he recognizes that I'm the one around here most in need of his protection.

When I was ready to start sleeping with Eleanor again and I needed some of those special thermal condoms, my belt couldn't locate them on any of the shoppers, not even on the medical supply ones, so I asked Fred. He said he knew of a place and would bring me some. He returned the next day with a whole shopping bag of special pharmaceuticals for the cellular challenged: vitamin supplements, suppositories, plaque-fighting tooth soap, and knee and elbow braces. He brought 20 dozen packages of condoms, and he winked as he stacked them on the table. He brought more stuff he left in the bag.

I reached into the bag. There were bottles of cologne and perfume, sticks of waxy deodorant, air fresheners and odor eaters. "Do I stink?" I said.

"Like cat's piss, sir. No offense."

I lifted my hand to my nose, but I couldn't smell anything. Then I remembered the "stinkers" on the Moon shuttle, and I knew how I smelled.

I wondered how Eleanor, during all those months, could have lived with me, eaten with me, and never mentioned it.

There was more in the bag: mouthwash and chewing gum. "My breath stinks too?"

In reply, Fred crossed his eyes and inflated his cheeks.

I thanked him for shopping for me, and especially for his frankness.

"Don't mention it, sir," he said. "I'm just glad to see you back in the saddle, if you catch my drift."

III

Two days ago was Ellen's first birthday. Unfortunately, Eleanor had to be away in Europe. Still, she arranged a little holo birthday party with her friends. Thirty-some people sat around, mesmerized by the baby, who had recently begun to walk. Only four of us, baby Ellen, a jenny, a russ, and I, were there in realbody. When I arrived and sat down, Ellen made a beeline for my lap. People laughed and said, "Daddy's girl."

I had the tundra dream again last night. I walked through the canopy lock right out into the white, frozen, endless tundra. The feeling was one of escape, relief, security.

My doctor gave me a complete physical last week. She said I had reached equilibrium with my condition. This was as good as it would get. Lately, I have been exercising. I have lost a little weight and feel somewhat stronger. But my joints ache something terrible and my doctor says they'll only get worse. She prescribed an old-time remedy: aspirin.

Fred left us two months ago. He and his wife succeeded in obtaining berths on a new station orbiting Mars. Their contracts are for five years with renewal options. Since arriving there, he's visited me in holo a couple times, says their best jump pilot is a stinker. And they have a stinker cartographer. Hint, hint.

Last week I finally purchased a personality bud for my belt system. It's having a rough time with me because I refuse to interact with it. I haven't even given it a name yet. I can't think of any suitable one. I call it "Hey, you," or "You, belt." Eleanor's chief of staff has repeated her offer to educate it for me, but I declined. In fact, I told her that if any of them breach its shell even once, I will abort it and start over with a new one.

Today at noon, we had a family crisis. The jenny on duty acquired a nosebleed while her backup was off running an errand. I was in the kitchen when I heard Ellen crying. In the nursery I found a hapless russ holding the kicking and screaming baby. The jenny called from the open bathroom door, "I'm coming. One minute, Ellie, I'm coming." When Ellen saw me she reached for me with her fat little arms and howled.

"Give her to me," I ordered the russ. His face reflected his hesitation.

"It's all right," I said.

"One moment, sir," he said and tongued for orders. "Okay, here." He gave me Ellen who wrapped her arms around my neck. "I'll just go and help Merrilee," he said, relieved, as he crossed to the bathroom. I sat down and put Ellen on my lap. She looked around, caught her breath, and resumed crying; only this time it was an easy, mournful wail.

"What is it?" I asked her. "What does Ellen want?" I reviewed what little I knew about babies. I felt her forehead, though I knew babies don't catch sick anymore. And with evercleans, they don't require constant changing. The remains of lunch sat on the tray, so she'd just eaten. A bellyache? Sleepy? Teething pains? Early on, Ellen was frequently feverish and irritable as her converted body sloughed off the remnants of the little boy chassis she'd overwritten. I wondered why during my year of brooding, I'd never grieved for him. Was it because he never had a soul? Because he never got beyond the purely data stage of recombination? Because he never owned a body? And what about Ellen, did she have her own soul, or did the original one stay through the conversion? And if it did, would it hate us for what we've done to its body?

Ellen cried, and the russ stuck his head out the bathroom every few moments to check on us. This angered me. What did they think I was going to do? Drop her? Strangle her? I knew they were watching me, all of them: the chief of staff, the security chief. They might even have awakened Eleanor in Hamburg or Paris where it was after midnight. No doubt they had a contingency plan for anything I might do.

"Don't worry, Ellie," I crooned. "Mama will be here in just a minute."

"Yes, I'm coming, I'm coming," said Eleanor's sleep-hoarse voice.

Ellen, startled, looked about, and when she didn't see her mother, bawled louder and more boldly. The jenny, holding a blood-soaked towel to her nose, peeked out of the bathroom.

I bounced Ellen on my knee. "Mama's coming, Mama's coming, but in the meantime, Sam's going to show you a trick. Wanna see a trick? Watch this." I pulled a strand of hair from my head. The bulb popped as it ignited, and the strand sizzled along its length. Ellen quieted in mid-fuss, and her eyes went wide. The russ burst out of the bathroom and sprinted toward us, but stopped and stared when he saw what I was doing. I said to him, "Take the jenny and leave us."

"Sorry, sir, I . . ." the russ paused, then cleared his throat. "Yes, sir, right away." He escorted the jenny, her head tilted back, from the suite.

"Thank you," I said to Eleanor.

"I'm here." We turned and found Eleanor seated next to us in an ornately carved, wooden chair. Ellen squealed with delight, but did not reach for her mother. Already by six months she had been able to distinguish between a holobody and a real one. Eleanor's eyes were heavy, and her hair mussed. She wore a long silk robe, one I'd never seen before, and her feet were bare. A sliver of jealousy pricked me when I realized she had probably been in bed with a lover. But what of it?

In a sweet voice, filled with the promise of soft hugs, Eleanor told us a story about a kooky caterpillar she'd seen that very day in a park in Paris. She used her hands on her lap to show us how it walked. Baby Ellen leaned back into my lap as she watched, and I found myself rocking her ever so gently. There was a squirrel with a bushy red tail involved in the story, and a lot of grown-up feet wearing very fashionable shoes, but I lost the gist of the story, so caught up was I in the voice that was telling it. El's voice spoke of an acorn who lost its cap and ladybugs coming to tea, but what it said was, I made you from the finest stuff. You are perfect. I will never let anyone hurt you. I love you always.

The voice shifted gradually, took an edge, and caused me the greatest sense of loss. It said, "And what about my big baby?"

"I'm okay," I said.

El told me about her day. Her voice spoke of schedules and meetings, a leader who lost his head, and diplomats coming to tea, but what it said was, You're a grown man who is capable of coping. You are important to me. I love it when you tease me and make me want you. It gives me great pleasure and takes me out of myself for a little while. Nothing is perfect, but we try. I will never hurt you. I love you always. Please don't leave me.

I opened my eyes. Ellen was a warm lump asleep on my lap, fist against cheek, lips slightly parted. I brushed her hair from her forehead with my sausage-like finger and traced the round curve of her cheek and chin. I must have examined her for quite a while, because when I looked up, Eleanor was waiting to catch my expression.

I said, "She has your eyebrows."

Eleanor laughed a powerful laugh. "Yes, my eyebrows," she laughed, "poor baby."

"No, they're her nicest feature."

"Yes, well, and what's happened to yours?"

"Nervous habit," I said. "I'm working on my chest hair now."

"In any case, you seem better."

"Yes, I believe I've turned the corner."

"Good, I've been so worried."

"In fact, I have just now thought of a name for my belt valet."

"Yes?" she said, relieved, interested.

"Skippy."

She laughed a belly laugh, "Skippy? Skippy?" Her face was lit with mirthful disbelief.

"Well, he's young," I said.

"Very young, apparently."

"Tomorrow I'm going to teach him how to hold a press conference." I didn't know I was going to say that until it was said.

"I see." Eleanor's voice hardened. "Thank you for warning me. What will it be about?"

"I'm sorry. That just came out. I guess it'll be a farewell. And a confession."

I could see the storm of calculation in Eleanor's face as her host of advisors whispered into her ear. Had I thrown them a curve? Come up with something unexpected? "What sort of confession?" she said. "What do you have to confess?"

"That I'm seared."

"That's not your fault, and no one will want to know anyway."

"Maybe not, but I've got to say it. I want people to know that I'm dying."

"We're *all* dying. Every living thing dies."

"Some faster than others."

"Sam, listen to me. I love you."

I knew that she did, her voice said so. "I love you too, but I don't belong here anymore."

"Yes, you do, Sam. This is your home."

I looked around me at the solid limestone wall, at the oak tree outside the window and the duck pond beyond. "It's very nice. I could have lived here, once."

"Sam, don't decide now. Wait till I return. Let's discuss it."

"Too late, I'm afraid."

She regarded me for several moments and said, "Where will you go?" By her question, I realized she had come to accept my departure, and I felt cheated. I had wanted more of a struggle. I had wanted an argument, enticements, tears, brave denial. But that wouldn't have been my El, my plan-for-everything Eleanor.

"Oh, I don't know," I said. "Just tramp around for a while, I guess. See what's what. Things have changed since the last time I looked." I stood up and held out the sleeping baby to El, who reached for her before we both remembered El was really in Europe. I placed Ellen in her crib and tucked her in. I kissed her cheek and quickly wiped it, before my kiss could burn her skin.

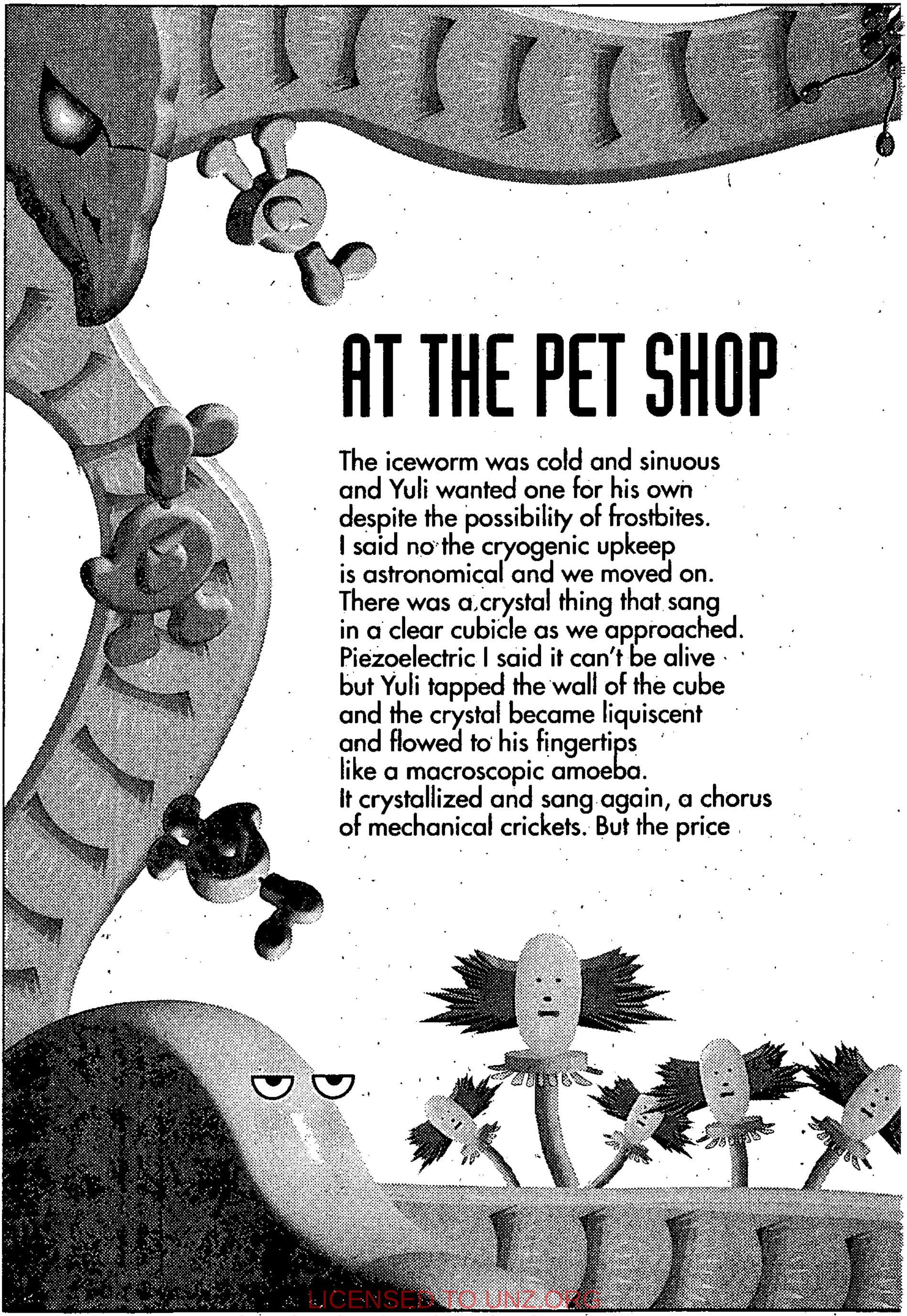
When I turned, El was standing, arms outstretched. She grazed my chest with her disembodied fingers. "Will you at least wait for me to give you a proper farewell? I can be there in four hours."

I hadn't intended to leave right away. I had just come up with the idea, after all. I needed to pack. I needed to arrange travel and accommodations. This could take days. But then I realized I was gone already and that I had everything I'd need: Skippy around my waist, my credit code, and the rotting stink of my body to announce me wherever I went.

She said, "At least stay in touch." A single tear slid down her face. "Don't be a stranger."

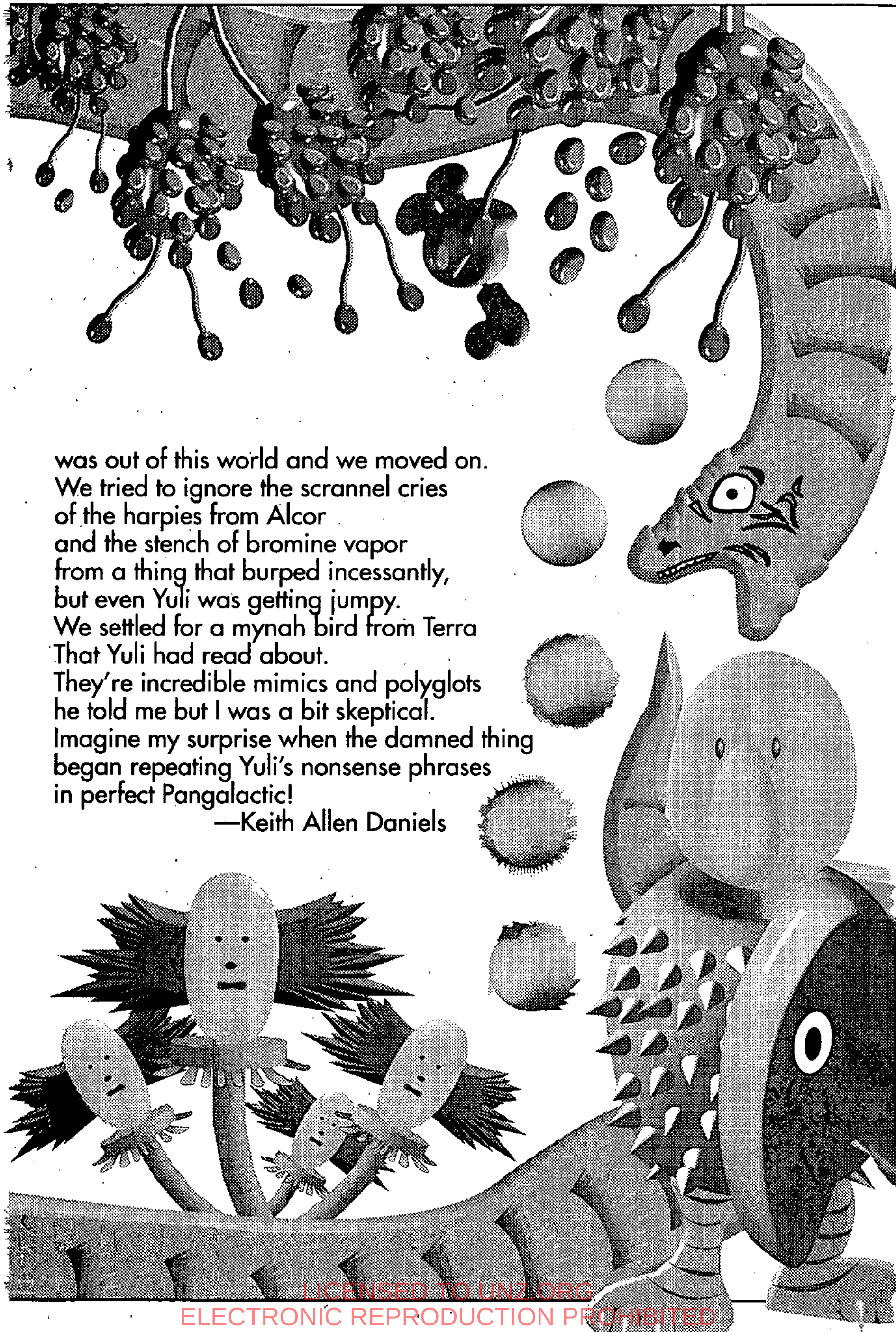
Too late for that too, dear El.

We were out of our minds with joy. Joy in full bloom and out of control, like weeds in our manicured lives. ○



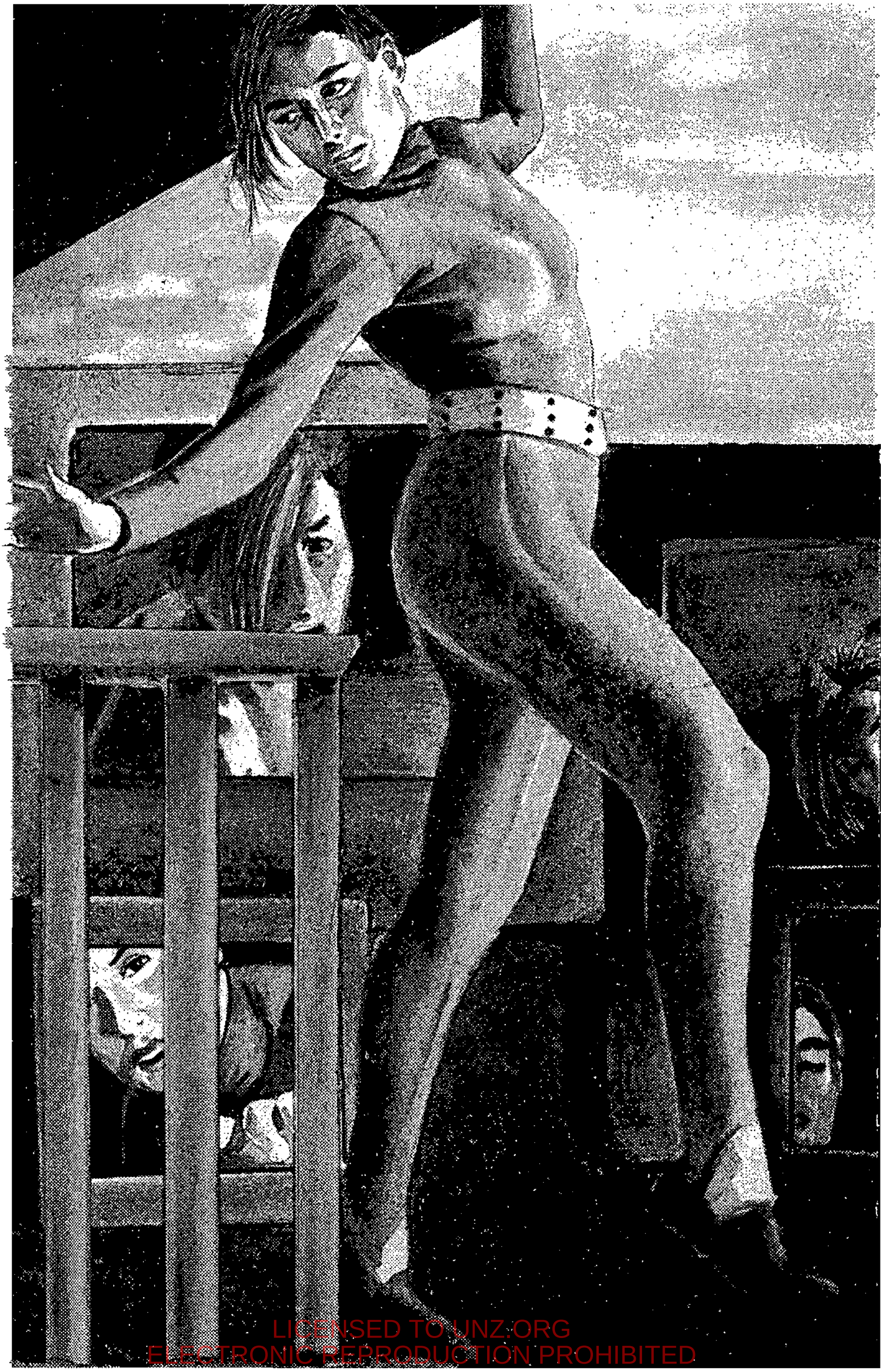
AT THE PET SHOP

The iceworm was cold and sinuous
and Yuli wanted one for his own
despite the possibility of frostbites.
I said no the cryogenic upkeep
is astronomical and we moved on.
There was a crystal thing that sang
in a clear cubicle as we approached.
Piezoelectric I said it can't be alive
but Yuli tapped the wall of the cube
and the crystal became liquiscent
and flowed to his fingertips
like a macroscopic amoeba.
It crystallized and sang again, a chorus
of mechanical crickets. But the price



was out of this world and we moved on.
We tried to ignore the scrannel cries
of the harpies from Alcor
and the stench of bromine vapor
from a thing that burped incessantly,
but even Yuli was getting jumpy.
We settled for a mynah bird from Terra
That Yuli had read about.
They're incredible mimics and polyglots
he told me but I was a bit skeptical.
Imagine my surprise when the damned thing
began repeating Yuli's nonsense phrases
in perfect Pangalactic!

—Keith Allen Daniels

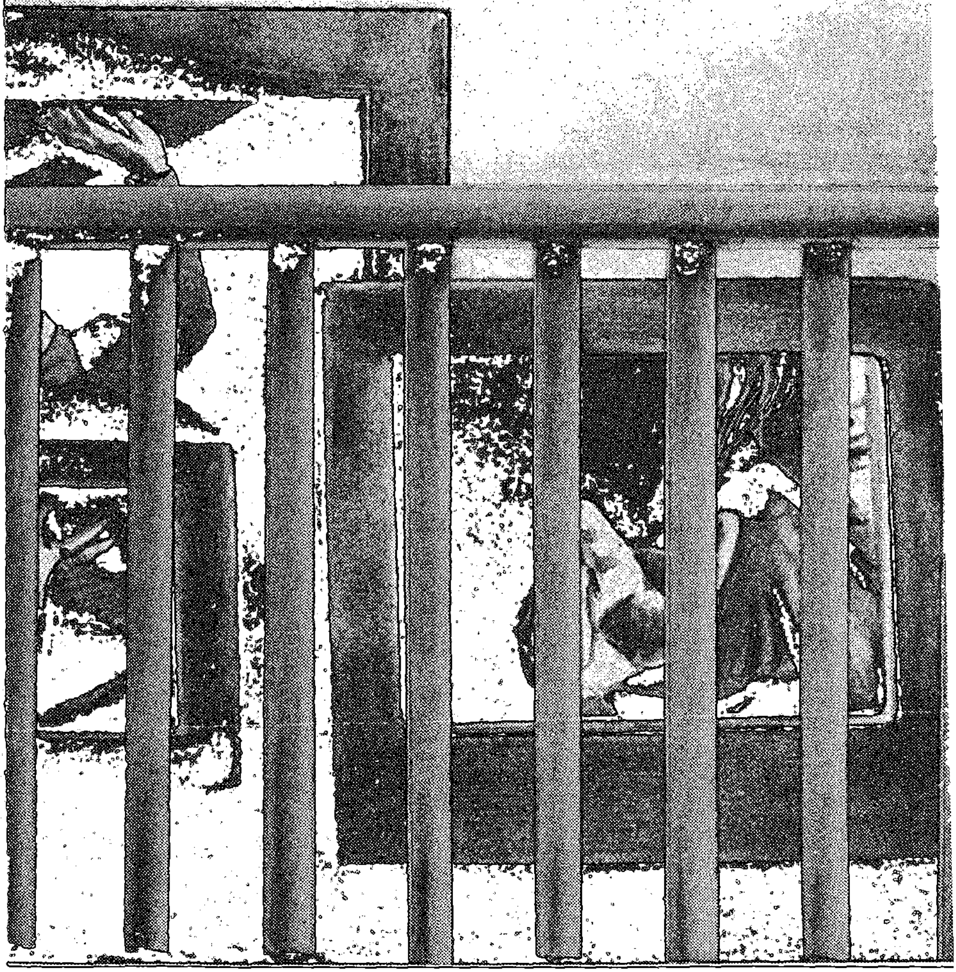


Greg Egan

TAP

Greg Egan's upcoming publications include the American edition of *Permutation City* (HarperCollins) and the British edition of his new science fiction novel, *Distress* (Orion/Millenium). Like his highly acclaimed novelette, "Cocoon" (*Asimov's*, May 1994), Mr. Egan's chilling "Tap" is a gripping tale of mystery and suspense.

Illustration by Steve Cavallo



I want you to find out who killed my mother, Ms. O'Connor. Will you do that?"

Helen Sharp's voice was unsteady with anger; she seemed almost as psyched up as if she'd come here to confront the killer, face-to-face. Under the circumstances, though, the very act of insisting that there *was* a killer was like shouting a defiant accusation from the rooftops—which must have taken some courage, even if she had no idea whom she was accusing.

I said carefully, "The coroner returned an open finding. I'm not a lawyer, but I imagine Third Hemisphere would still settle out of court for a significant—"

"Third Hemisphere have no case to answer! And sure, maybe they'd pay up anyway—just to avoid the publicity. But as it happens, I'm not interested in *legalized blackmail."* Her eyes flashed angrily; she made no effort to conceal her outrage. No doubt her lawyers had already given her exactly the same advice; it didn't look like the idea would ever grow on her. She was thirty-two—only five years younger than me—but she radiated so much stubborn idealism that I found it hard not to think of her as belonging to another generation entirely.

I raised one hand in a conciliatory gesture. "Fine. It's your decision. But I suggest you don't sign anything that limits your options—and don't make any public declarations of absolution. After six months paying my expenses, you might change your mind. Or I might even turn up something that will change it for you. Stranger things have happened." Though nothing much stranger than a next-of-kin declining to screw a multinational for all it was worth.

Sharp said impatiently, "The TAP implant was *not* responsible. There's no evidence to suggest that it was."

"No, and there's no evidence to suggest foul play, either."

"That's why I'm hiring you. To find it."

I glanced irritably at the north-facing window; the allegedly smart pane was ablaze with sunlight, rendering most of the office almost as hot as the sweltering streets of King's Cross below.

Grace Sharp had been dead for a month. I'd been following the case informally, like everyone else in Sydney, out of sheer morbid curiosity. On the evening of January 12, she'd been at work in her study, apparently alone. The immediate cause of death had been a myocardial infarction, but the autopsy had also shown signs of a powerful adrenaline surge. That could have resulted from the pain and stress of a heart attack already in progress—or it could have come first, triggered by an unknown external shock.

Or, the Total Affect Protocol chip in her brain might have flooded her body with adrenaline for no good reason at all.

Sharp had been sixty-seven—in reasonable health for her age, but old enough to blur the boundaries of the possible. Forensic pathologists had struggled at the inquest to allocate probabilities to the three alternatives, but there'd been no clear front-runner. Which was no doubt distressing for the relatives—and no doubt left them vulnerable to the fantasy that there had to be a simple answer out there somewhere, just waiting to be found.

Helen Sharp said, "The *media consensus* is that my mother was composing a poem just before she died—and she thought a word in TAP so 'powerful' that it killed her on the spot." Her tone was venomous. "Do they seriously imagine that ninety thousand sane people would put something in their brains that was *capable* of doing that? Or that the manufacturers would sell a device that would leave them open to billions of dollars worth of compensation claims? Or that the government licensing authorities—"

I said, "Licensed pharmaceuticals have killed plenty of people. Implants are even harder to test. And 'fail-safe' software written to the most rigorous military specifications has crashed aircraft—"

She seized on the analogy triumphantly. "And how do you know that? Because the aircraft's black box proved it! Well, the TAP implant has its own black box: an independent chip that logs all its actions. *And there was no record of any malfunction.* No record of the implant triggering an adrenaline release at *any* level—let alone a fatal dose."

"Maybe the black box glitched, too. You say it's independent—but if there's enough connectivity to let it know everything the implant does, the combined system might still be vulnerable to some kind of shared failure mode that the designers never anticipated."

Sharp clenched her fists in frustration. "That's not—literally—impossible," she conceded. "But I don't believe it's likely."

"All right. What do you think happened?"

Sharp composed herself, with the air of someone weary of repeating the same message, gathering up her strength with a promise to herself that this would be the last time.

She said, "My mother *was* working on a new poem that night—the black box makes that clear. But the time of death can't be determined precisely—and it could have been as much as fifteen minutes after the last recorded use of the implant. I believe she was interrupted. I believe someone broke into the apartment and killed her.

"I don't know how they did it. Maybe they just terrorized her—without laying a finger on her—and that was enough to bring on the heart attack." Her voice was flat, deliberately emotionless. "Or maybe they gave her a transdermal dose of a powerful stimulant. There are dozens of chemicals that could have triggered a heart attack, without leaving a trace. She wasn't found for almost nine hours. There are carbohydrate analogs of stimulatory neuropeptides which are degraded into glucose and water on a time scale of *minutes*."

I resisted the urge to cite the lack of evidence for an intruder; it would have been a waste of breath. "Why, though? Why would anyone want to kill her?"

She hesitated. "I'm not sure how much you know about TAP."

"Assume the worst."

"Well . . . it's been wrongly described as just about everything from 'telepathy' to 'computerized Esperanto' to 'the multimedia standard for the brain.' Sure, it began with a fusion of language and VR—but it's been growing for almost fifteen years now. There's still a word for <<dog>> "—she sketched the angle-brackets with her fingers, and I picked up on the convention later—"which might as well be *hundo*—and another for <<your beloved golden Labrador standing on the beach shaking the water from its coat before licking your face>> . . . which will evoke all that and more in all five senses, if you let it.

"But at the leading edge, now, we're creating words for concepts, emotions, states of mind, which might once have defied description altogether. With TAP, ultimately there's *nothing* a human being can experience that needs to remain . . . ineffable, mysterious, incommunicable. Nothing is beyond discussion. Nothing is beyond analysis. Nothing is 'unspeakable.' And a lot of people find that prospect threatening; it turns a lot of old power structures on their head."

If that cliché came true every time it was invoked, power structures would be oscillating faster than mains current. Helen Sharp was pushing seven on my paranoia index; on top of all her understandable grief and frustration, she belonged to a technosubculture that was poorly understood by the mainstream, frequently misrepresented—and that clearly liked to think of itself as a "dangerously" iconoclastic elite.

I said, "I know there are people who find TAP users . . . unacceptable. But what's going to drive them to extremes like murder, all of a sudden? In fifteen years, has anyone, anywhere, been killed simply for having the implant?"

"Not to my knowledge. But—"

"Then surely—"

"But I can tell you exactly what's changed. I can tell you why the conflict has just entered a whole new phase."

That got my attention. "Go on."

"You know it's against the law to install a TAP implant in anyone younger than eighteen years old?"

"Of course." The same restriction applied to all neural hardware, other than therapeutic chips that restored normal function to the injured or congenitally disabled.

"Early in March, a couple here in Sydney will commence legal proceedings with the aim of ensuring that they're free to install the implant in all their future children—at the age of three months."

I was momentarily speechless. These plans had clearly been kept within a very tight circle of supporters; the saturation media coverage of the inquest hadn't mentioned so much as a rumor. After a month of intense journalistic scrutiny, I hadn't expected the TAP-heads to have any surprises left.

I said, "Legal proceedings on what basis?"

"That they're entitled to raise their family using whatever language they choose. That's guaranteed in Federal legislation: there's a 2011 bill which brings into force most of the provisions of the 2005 UN Covenant on Human Rights. They'll be seeking a ruling from the High Court that invalidates the relevant sections of the New South Wales criminal code. It's far more difficult, from a legal point of view, than trying to defend themselves against a prosecution after the fact . . . but it does save them the trouble of having to find a surgeon willing to risk martyrdom."

Sharp smiled faintly. "The same Federal law was invoked about a year ago, by a signing couple who were being pressured by Community Services to give their son a hearing implant. The parents won the first round—and it looks like there isn't going to be an appeal. But a pro-implant case was always going to be much harder, of course. And *signing* is positively respectable, compared to TAP."

"I assume the police know all this?"

"Of course. They don't appear to be particularly interested, though—and I wasn't able to raise it at the inquest. Legally speaking, I suppose it really is just static."

"But you think—"

"I think a death widely attributed to the TAP implant would transform the prospects of the challenge succeeding from merely poor to . . . politically impossible. I think there are people who'd consider *that* to be a result worth killing for."

Sharp fixed her gaze on me for a moment, and then nodded slightly, almost sympathetically—as if I'd just uttered a word that expressed all the conflicting emotions running through my head: <<*Neural hardware in the skull of a three-month-old child—just to indulge its parents' whims—would be an obscenity*. But . . . if the ubiquitous hearing implants that grant English-before-sign are no "whim," why is an implant that grants TAP-before-English a whim? And if Grace Sharp *was* murdered to sway the odds against the challenge, her self-righteous killers belong in prison, regardless—and my own knee-jerk revulsion at the prospect of infant TAP-heads only goes to show that it could easily have been a powerful enough motive.>>

She said, "And I think you're going to take the case."

I started work that afternoon, reviewing the technical literature on the

TAP implant—the closest thing to an objective account of its capabilities I was likely to find. Like most people, I imagined I already understood all the salient features—but it turned out that I'd swallowed more misinformation from the nets than I'd realized.

The two chips—the implant proper and the black box, both less than a millimeter wide—sat at the back of the skull, sharing access to a fine web of conductive polymer threads that wrapped the brain, making billions of quasi-synaptic contacts with the visual and auditory cortex, and Wernicke's speech area in the temporal lobe. Other threads penetrated deeper, some as far as the limbic system. TAP could always be spoken or written, but bandwidth requirements made modulated infrared the medium of choice, so the implant was linked, via the spinal cord, to bioengineered IR transceiver cells in the skin of the palms.

Merely installing the implant didn't grant instant fluency in TAP; the language still had to be learnt. A complete, "preloaded" vocabulary would never have worked; the precise meaning of most words in TAP could only be encoded in context, once the implant resided in a particular user's brain. The implant's own electronic neural net was 90 percent blank at installation, containing only a specialized language acquisition system and a simple "bootstrap" vocabulary. And though the learning process left its mark mostly within the implant itself—along with some relatively minor changes to the regions of the brain where a second natural language would have been encoded—it was meaningless to talk about either brain or chip "knowing TAP," in isolation. An experienced user who exchanged his or her old implant for a new one straight from the factory would have been dragged back almost to square one (in practice, all the data from the old hardware would be copied to the new)—but equally, an experience-enriched implant placed in a novice's brain would have been as unusable as a slice of someone else's cerebral cortex.

These observations applied strictly to adults, of course. Despite several dozen theoretical papers—most of them cautiously optimistic—no one really knew how a young child's brain would interact with the implant.

A TAP user could interpret a standard VR sensorium—but there was, deliberately, no provision for interacting in the conventional way with a non-existent environment. Immersive VR implants temporarily paralyzed the organic body and diverted motor impulses from the brain into a fully computerized somatic model: a virtual body that could function as part of the virtual environment—subject to the environment's rules. In contrast, a TAP user's idea of *interaction* was more along the lines of rethinking the whole sensorium and spitting it back out, or responding with something entirely different—arguing with the whole premise, instead of passively accepting it. A VR user had little choice but to suspend disbelief, or quit—a full-sense environment, surreal or not, was always compelling—but a TAP user could deal with the same kind of information with as much or as little detachment as he or she desired. Words in TAP—which included the entire sensorium-descriptor vocabulary of VR—could evoke images ten thousand times more vivid and precise than the densest poetic English . . . or they could be held at arm's length and scrutinized dispassionately, as easily as any English-speaker could contemplate the phrase "a flash of blinding radiance" or "the overpowering stench of ammonia" without experiencing anything of the kind. In the jargon of the implant's designers—English words, predating TAP itself—every TAP word could be *scanned* (understood analytically), or *played* (experienced subjectively)—or interpreted in a manner lying anywhere at all between those two extremes.

In one respect, though, TAP could be more immersive than the most authoritarian VR: it could induce emotional states directly. VR was confined to pure sense data (albeit often manipulative in the extreme), but in Total Affect Protocol there were words for <<fear>>, <<euphoria>>, <<sadness>> (or rather, nuanced subtypes of these crude English categories)—and the implant could reach deep into the limbic system and trigger these states as easily as any VR chip could generate the illusion of an unambiguously blue sky.

The user's power to keep the language at a distance remained, of course—and the TAP word for <<crippling despair>> could only induce the "referent state" if a conscious effort was made to *play* it. And though TAP's formal grammar ruled out nothing, low-level filters stood guard against potentially stupefying linguistic singularities—such as <<the desire to play this word forever>>—or anything physiologically dangerous.

Still, although the literature was blithely reassuring on this point, in the end it came down to a question of trusting the manufacturers and the regulators. I didn't doubt that, in theory, a TAP chip could be designed that was no more likely than the unmodified human brain to strike the user dead if the word for <<fatal adrenaline rush>> accidentally came to mind—but whether or not Third Hemisphere had achieved that level of safety—for every conceivable user—was another matter.

Grace Sharp had been the oldest of the ninety thousand TAP speakers on the planet, and reputedly one of the most proficient—but whether *proficiency* implied more risk, from a greater vocabulary, or less, due to better control of the language, I couldn't say.

By half past seven, I'd had enough of wading through papers on distortion-free affect-compression algorithms. I closed the office and headed for the station.

I could still smell the day's heat wafting up from Victoria Road, but there was a faint hint of a breeze from the east. The gaudy advertising holograms never looked quite as tacky at dusk as they did at dawn, although the colors were just as washed-out; maybe it was really all down to the mood on the streets. A few sweat-stained commuters were still on their way home, radiating palpable relief—and a few freshly laundered revelers were already arriving, full of hopeful energy. Somehow, dawn in King's Cross never looked hopeful.

I passed a gaggle of saffron-robed monks from the Darlinghurst Temple, out hunting for alms, on the other side of the street. James didn't seem to be among them—though it was hard to tell: they all looked interchangeable to me, and my strongest memories of him didn't encompass the terminal, shaven-headed stage. Even when I recalled the night he announced that he was leaving me and Mick for a life devoted to selfless contemplation—"There's no point arguing, Kath," he'd explained, with an expression of transcendent smugness, "I'm not enslaved by the illusions of language anymore."—even then, strangely enough, I pictured him as he'd looked ten years before. Buddhism had been growing ever more fashionable throughout the country for most of my lifetime—taking the place of retreating Christianity, as if the "vacuum" left behind needed to be filled by something equally absurd—but in the last ten years the Federal government had started supporting the monasteries in a big way, with a program of "community spiritual development" grants. Maybe they were hoping to save on social security payments.

I hesitated outside the station, thinking: *A single TAP word could capture this moment—perfectly encoding my entire sensorium, and everything I'm thinking and feeling.* A word I could speak, write, recall. Study at a distance—*scan*—or *play*, relive completely. Inflect and modify. Quote exactly (or not) to the closest friend or the most distant stranger.

I had to admit that it was a deeply unsettling notion: a language that could encompass, if not the universe itself, then everything we could possibly experience of it. At any given moment, there were "only" ten to the power three thousand subjectively distinguishable states of the human brain. A mere ten thousand bits of information: quite a mouthful, encoded as syllables—but only a millisecond flash in infrared. A TAP user could effectively narrate his or her entire inner life, with one hundred percent fidelity, in real time. Leopold Bloom, eat your heart out.

I boarded the southbound train, the skin on the back of my neck still tingling. The carriage was packed, so I stood strap-hanging with my eyes closed, letting the question spin in the darkness of my skull: *Who, or what, killed Grace Sharp?* Work was never something I could switch on and off—and unless I reached the stage where part of me was thinking about the case every waking moment, the chances were I'd make no progress at all.

Helen Sharp believed in some faceless conspiracy against TAP as a first language, driven by sheer linguistic xenophobia—though the real opposition might also be motivated, in part, by perfectly valid concerns about the unknown developmental consequences for a child growing up with TAP.

The serious media favored a simple failure of technology; several worthy editorials had rewritten the Sharp case as a cautionary tale about the need for improved quality control in biomedical engineering. Meanwhile, the tabloids had gleefully embraced the idea of the <<death>> word, quasi-mystical enough to give their anti-tech subscribers a frisson of self-righteousness at the poetic justice of a TAP-head thinking herself into oblivion . . . and their pro-tech ones a frisson of awe at the sheer Power of the Chip.

And it was still possible that Grace Sharp had simply had a heart attack, all by herself. No assassins, no fatal poetry, no glitch.

So far, I could only agree with the coroner: I wasn't prepared to rule anything out.

By the time I arrived home, Mick had already eaten and retreated to his room to play *Austro-Hungarian Political Intrigues in Space*. He'd been running the scenario for almost six months, along with a dozen friends—some in Sydney, some in Beijing, some in Sao Paulo. They'd graciously let me join in once, as a minor character with an unpronounceable name, but I'd become terminally bored after ten minutes and engineered my own death as swiftly as possible. I had nothing against role-playing games, *per se* . . . but this was the most ludicrous one I'd encountered since *Postmodernism Ate My Love Child*. Still, every twelve-year-old needed something truly appalling to grow out of—something to look back on in a year's time with unconditional embarrassment. The books I'd read, myself (and adored, at the time), had been no better.

I knocked on his door, and entered. He was lying on his bed with the headset on and his hands above his head, making minimalist gestures with both control gloves: driving a software puppet body that had no sense of touch, or balance, or proprioception. He was moving its limbs with actions that had nothing to do with moving his own . . . but he was seeing and hearing everything through the puppet's eyes and ears.

Most of the studies I'd read had suggested that the earlier a child took up VR (headset-and-glove, of course, not implant-based), the fewer side-effects it had on real-life coordination and body image. The skills of moving real and virtual bodies didn't seem to compete for limited neural resources; they could be learnt in parallel, as easily as two languages. Only adults got confused between the two (and did better with VR implants, which let them pretend they were using their physical bodies). The research suggested that an hour a day in VR was no more harmful than an hour a day of any other equally unnatural activity: violin practice, ballet, karate.

I still worried, though.

The room monitor flagged my presence. At a convenient break in the action, Mick slipped off the headset to greet me, doing his best to hide his impatience.

I said, "School?"

He shrugged. "Bland-out. Work?"

"I've got a murder case."

His face lit up. "Resonant! What class weapon?"

"Unkind words."

"*¿Que?*"

"It's a joke." I almost started to explain, but it didn't seem fair to hold up the other players. "You'll quit at nine, okay? I don't want to have to check on you."

"Mmmm." Deliberately noncommital.

I said calmly, "I can program it, or you can stick to the rules voluntarily. It's your choice."

He scowled. "It's no choice, if it makes no difference."

"Very profound. But I happen to disagree." I walked over to him and brushed the hair from his eyes; he gave me his I-wish-you-wouldn't-but-you're-forgiven-this-time look.

Mick said suddenly, "Unkind words? You mean Grace Sharp?"

I nodded, surprised.

"Some *guru* last week was prating about her TAPping herself to death." He seemed greatly amused—and it struck me that "guru" was several orders of magnitude more insulting than anything I would have dared to say in front of my mother, at his age. At least put-downs were getting more elegant; my generation's equivalents had relied almost exclusively on references to excrement or genitalia. Mick and his contemporaries weren't at all prudish—they just found the old scatological forms embarrassingly childish.

I said, "You don't believe in the <<death>> word?"

"Not some *banana skin landmine* you make yourself, by accident."

I pondered that. "But if it exists at all, don't you think it'd be easier to fight if it came from outside, than if you stumbled on it in your own thoughts?"

He shook his head knowingly. "TAP's not like that. You can't invent random words in your head—you can't try out random bit-patterns. You can imagine things, you can free-associate, but . . . *not all the way to death, without seeing it coming.*"

I laughed. "So when did you read up on this?"

"Last week. The story sounded flash, so I went context mining." He glanced at his terminal and made some slight hand movements; a cluster of icons for Universal Resource Locators poured into an envelope with my name on it, which darted into the outgoing mail box. "References."

"Thanks. I wasted the whole afternoon—I should have come home early and picked your brains instead." I was only half joking.

I sat on the edge of the bed. "If she didn't stumble on the word herself, though . . . I don't see how anyone could have spoken it to her: as far as the police could tell, she'd had no visitors—or communications—for hours. And if someone broke into the apartment, they left no trace."

"How about . . . ?" Mick gestured with one gloved thumb at the shelf above his bed.

"What?" I parsed the clutter of objects slowly. "Ah."

He'd set up an IR link with his friend Vito, who lived in an apartment block across the park; they could exchange data twenty-four hours a day without either family paying a cent to the fibre barons. The collimated beam of the five-dollar transceiver passed effortlessly through both their bedroom windows.

"You think someone outside the apartment . . . shot her in the palm with a <<death>> word?" The notion conjured up bizarre images: a figure taking aim with a gunless night-sight; Grace Sharp with outstretched arms and infrared stigmata.

"Maybe. Split the fee, if I'm right?"

"Sure. Minus rent, food, clothes, communications—"

Mick mimed violin playing. I feigned a swipe at his head. He glanced at the terminal; his friends were losing patience.

I said, "I'd better leave you to it."

He smiled, held up his hand in a farewell gesture like a diver about to submerge, then slipped the headset back on. I lingered in the room for a few seconds, feeling profoundly strange.

Not because I felt that I was losing touch with my son. I wasn't. But the fact that we could comprehend each other at all suddenly seemed like the most precarious voodoo. Natural language had endured, fundamentally unchanged, through a thousand social and technological revolutions . . . but TAP made it look like some Stone Age tool, a flake of crudely shaped obsidian in an era when individual atoms could be picked up and rearranged at whim.

And maybe in the long run, all the trial-and-error and misunderstandings, all the folk remedies of smiles and gestures, all the clumsy imperfect well-meaning attempts to bridge the gap, would be swept away by the dazzling torrent of communication without bounds.

I closed the door quietly on my way out.

The next morning I started going through the transcripts of the inquest—which included a 3-D image of Sharp's study. The body had been found around 8:20 A.M. by a domestic aid who came three times a week—Sharp, although generally fit, had suffered from severe arthritis in her hands. Paramedics had removed the body before the police became involved, but they'd snapped the scene first as a routine procedure.

The apartment was on the twenty-fifth floor, and the study had a large window facing west. The curtains were shown fully open—although there was nothing in the transcripts, one way or the other, about the possibility that the man who'd found the body, or even the paramedics, might have opened them to let in some light. I grafted the image into the local council's plan of the suburb, and did some crude ray-tracing from where the forensic software suggested Sharp had been standing before she fell. A bullet would have left directional information—but a burst of IR could have come from any location with a clear line of sight. Given the uncertainty in her position, and the size of the window, the possibilities encompassed the windows and balconies of sixty-three apartments. Most were beyond the range of cheap hobbyists' IR equipment—but I looked up skin-transceiver sensitivity, attenuation in the atmosphere, and beam spread parameters, then started checking product catalogues. There were several models of communications lasers that would have done the job—and the cheapest was only three hundred dollars. Not the kind of thing you could buy from an electronics retailer, but there were no formal restrictions on purchase or ownership. It wasn't a weapon, after all.

The world's greatest TAP poet, shot by a word? It was a seductive idea—and I was surprised that the tabloids hadn't seized on it, weeks ago—but in the cold light of morning, I was finding it increasingly difficult to believe that Grace Sharp had died from anything but natural causes. The building had excellent security; the forensic team had found no sign of an intruder. The testimony of the black box wasn't watertight, but on balance it probably *did* exonerate the implant. And Helen Sharp herself had been convinced that the <<death>> word was impossible.

I spent the morning slogging through the rest of the transcripts, but there was nothing very illuminating. The experts had washed their hands of Grace Sharp's death. I didn't blame them: if the evidence supported no clear verdict, the honest thing to do was to say so. At most inquests, though, *someone* managed to slip a speculation or two into the proceedings: a pathologist's gut-level hunch, an engineer's unprovable intuition. A few lines I could wave accusingly in their face when I cornered them in their office—prompting them to spill the whole elaborate, unofficial hypothesis they'd been nurturing in their head for months. But there wasn't a single foothold here, a single indiscretion I could pursue; every witness had been cautious to a fault.

So I had nowhere else to go: I steeled myself and went trawling through the archives for the enemies of TAP.

Media releases (mainly from politicians and religious figures), letters and essays in edited publications, and postings to net forums gave me about seventeen thousand individuals who'd had something disparaging to say to the world about TAP. The search algorithm was multilingual, but I didn't trust it to pick up irony reliably, so even this crude first grab had to be taken with a mountain of salt. Twelve percent of the forum postings were anonymous—and the random sample I inspected made it clear that they came from the most vehement opponents—but I put them aside; textual analysis of a few gigabytes of invective could wait for barrel-scraping time.

Clustering software picked up some fairly predictable connections. Two-thirds of the people I'd found were officially speaking on behalf of, or explicitly mentioned their membership or approval of, one of ninety-six organizations: political, religious, or cultural.

The software drew ninety-six star-diagrams. The biggest cluster was for Natural Wisdom: a quasi-green lobby group set up for the sole purpose of opposing the use of neural hardware. Most members were European, but there was a significant Australian presence. Second largest was The Fountain of Righteousness, a United States-based fundamentalist Christian coalition; they had half a dozen local affiliate churches. Cluster size didn't necessarily measure the strength of opposition, though; the Roman Catholic church ranked a mere thirtieth—but only because it was so rigidly hierarchical, with a relatively small list of appointed spokesmen. Most Islamic authorities weren't keen on neural hardware, either—but many predominantly Islamic countries had simply outlawed the technology, largely defusing it as an issue. Islam's best showing was for a UK group, and that was ranked fifty-seventh.

I cut the data set down to Australia only. Nineteen organizations remained—and the top six rankings stayed the same, for what that was worth. There was something of the flavor of a witch-hunt to this whole analysis; I wasn't publicly accusing anyone of anything—I wasn't libeling Natural Wisdom as murderous thugs for daring to speak out against the implant—but this kind of crude fishing expedition always made me feel distinctly uneasy.

Still, if these were the people who'd feel most threatened by the prospect of children growing up with TAP . . . who among them could have known about the impending High Court challenge?

I scanned the membership databases of legal and paralegal associations, and the mailing lists of relevant journals, scooping up anyone who gave an address care of Huntingdale and Partners—the firm who were preparing the "infant implant" brief.

There was zero overlap with the anti-TAP set—which was no great surprise. I imagined the police would have gone at least this far, and they'd had better resources: they could have pulled the whole Huntingdale workforce from taxation records, with no chance of so much as a clerical assistant falling through the cracks.

I gazed at the screen, dispirited. All I had to show for a day's work were sixty-three apartments with a view of Grace Sharp's study, and seventeen thousand people who'd done nothing more incriminating than put themselves on the record as opponents of TAP.

The only thing left to try was intersecting the two.

Finding apartment numbers to match the physical locations in the building plans was the hardest part; architects and developers didn't have to file anything so petty when they had their projects approved. I was actually beginning to contemplate doing the necessary legwork myself, when I discovered that someone had done it for me: an *ad hoc* consortium of sellers of insurance, fire-alarms, security equipment, and climate control had commissioned a database for the entire metropolitan area, to help them target their junk mail. The suburb I needed only cost fifty bucks—complete with e-mail tags.

I cross-matched with the anti-TAP set.

A single name appeared.

John Dallaporta belonged to none of my organizational clusters, and I had only one piece of data on his attitude to TAP: a short essay he'd written, seven years before, decrying the implant's potential to "erode the richness of our ancient and beautiful tongues" and "invade the still, mysterious spaces of our minds." The essay had appeared in a secondary English teachers' netzine; I summoned up the whole issue, and flipped through its innocuous contents. The majority of the articles dealt with working conditions, and concerns arising out of new technology; there was also an earnest—almost painfully respectful—discussion of strategies for coping with parents who forbade their children contact with the filthy/sexist/atheistic/elitist/superstitious/obsolete works of Shakespeare, *et al.* Not the kind of venue you'd seriously expect to lead you to a man who slaughtered his ideological enemies.

I re-read Dallaporta's essay carefully. It was passionate, but hardly inflammatory; he sounded very much like just one more plaintive, insecure technophobe letting off steam, to a no doubt largely sympathetic audience. I was inclined to be sympathetic, myself—in all honesty, the implant made my skin crawl—but there was a self-serving undercurrent which detracted from the force of his arguments. Certainly, portraying *English* as an endangered language was ridiculous, when more people were speaking it than at any other time in history.

And though I could picture Dallaporta outside the court with a placard, once the challenge to the implant legislation began, I found it hard to imagine the author of these moderate words killing Grace Sharp in cold blood—and harder still to imagine him discovering the means to do it.

I was growing tired of desk work, but I spent the next few hours studying the fragmentary portrait of the man offered by the net. He was forty-seven years old, divorced five years, with two daughters in their midteens. Presumably his ex-wife had custody of both children, since all the data suggested that he lived alone. He'd been a teacher in government high schools all his working life; in his late twenties, he'd published some poetry in literary journals, but unless he'd adopted an undocumented pseudonym, there'd been nothing since. He seemed to belong to no organization but the State School Teachers' Union, and if he subscribed to any religion, no marketing demographer had yet managed to pin it down.

So much for the electronic profile. I didn't believe for a moment that he could have killed Grace Sharp—but I wasn't prepared to rule it out until I'd met him in the flesh.

I found a calendar of events for the Laurence Brereton Memorial High School. There was a parent-teacher night in three days' time.

I arrived late enough not to have to loiter outside for too long before catching sight of a few departing parents, still wearing their name badges. I got a good look at the style and the materials used—but I was even luckier than that: one man dropped his badge into a recycling bin right before my eyes. I'd come prepared with a variety of cardboard samples, safety pins and clips, but all I had to do was fish out this discarded one, match the font on my notepad's printer, and spray my own—borrowed—name onto the blank side.

No one challenged me as I entered the crowded hall and walked straight past the desk where parents were lining up to register their attendance and collect their badges. I spotted a row of work stations dispensing guidance; I walked up to one and tried to make an inquiry, but it was too clever by far: the only entry point was "parent's name"—apparently all it needed in order to highlight every relevant teacher on a personalized map of the hall. I stood back and watched other people use the software, until Dallaporta's name appeared.

It seemed an odd time of year for an event like this; Mick's high school had held an orientation night before the start of term, but they hadn't yet invited me back. The buzz of conversation around me sounded remarkably amiable, though; maybe it was a good strategy to drag the parents in as early as this, and try to nip any problems in the bud.

John Dallaporta was tall and slender, clean-shaven, slightly balding. He was being talked at loudly by someone's proud father—and though his eyes were glazed, and his smile a little wooden, he didn't strike me as a man who'd been sleepless with guilt for the past five weeks.

When the father departed, I approached purposefully. Dallaporta offered his hand and said smoothly, "Good to see you, Ms. Stone." He hesitated. "I'm sorry, but I don't think I—"

I smiled disarmingly. "No, you don't teach my daughter. But I wanted to speak to you, and this seemed like too good an opportunity to pass up. I hope you don't mind."

"Not at all. But I should explain: I'm not the head of department this year. It rotates between the senior teachers, so Carol Bailey—" He glanced around, then pointed her out. "Do you see—?"

I shook my head apologetically. "It's not a departmental matter. I just wanted to meet you. I read an essay you wrote, a few years ago: *The Bit-*

Stream of the Rose. And I liked what you had to say there, very much. So when I realized you were teaching in my daughter's new school . . ."

Dallaporta eyed me curiously, a little bemused, but he betrayed no obvious unease or suspicion. "That's so long ago now, I'm surprised you remember it at all. Let alone the name of the author."

"Of course I remember! And I just hope the rest of the department shares your values on those . . . issues. I used to teach English, myself. I *know* the kind of pressures you're facing. And of course I want my own children to be *technologically literate*—but some of us have to take a stand, or who knows what 'technologically literate' will *mean*, in twenty years' time?"

Dallaporta nodded affably, but now I could see muscles tightening at the sides of his jaws—the ones which contract when you're trying too hard not to let anything show. *Proving what?* Nothing at all—except that he had stronger feelings about TAP than he cared to discuss with a total stranger in a crowded hall.

I kept pushing. "When I started high school, myself, if you didn't have your own PC on your desk at home, you were marginalized. These days the work stations come for free—if you sign up for a thousand-a-month worth of 'vital' net access. And any child who can't interview Afghani nomads for a geography assignment—or get a live feed from the latest Venus probe via JPL—might as well quit and go work at McDonalds. *When does it stop?* When my grandchildren are twelve, what will 'entry level' be, for them?"

Dallaporta laughed, not quite naturally. "I wouldn't dare hazard a guess. But I have faith in people. In common sense."

I made direct eye contact, trying to decide if he was genuinely rattled—or just didn't trust himself to get on the soapbox, even for such an obviously sympathetic listener.

"Common sense? I hope you're right. I've heard some rumors lately which don't bear thinking about—"

Dallaporta blanched visibly. *Meaning he knew about the court case? And now assumed that I had some connection to whoever had given him the news?* I offered him a conspiratorial smile: *Relax, I'm a friend, we're on the same side.*

I said, "Look, I didn't mean to take up so much of your time. But it was so nice to meet you, finally." I held out my hand, and Dallaporta shook it, slipping back onto autopilot with obvious relief.

I walked out into the warm evening. There was a real Lydia Stone, with a daughter who'd just started eighth grade; Dallaporta might check the records, but I didn't think he was likely to confront the girl's teachers and ask them to sketch an identikit for comparison.

I glanced up at the washed-out sky, at the handful of visible stars—and thought once more: *this moment would be a single word, in TAP.* <<The

scent of cut grass from the playing fields, the rumble of suburban traffic, the melancholy yellow lights of the hall beside the darkness of the empty classrooms.>> *A moment skewered like a butterfly? A ten-thousand-bit digital corpse of the world, shedding dead pixels in the mind's eye?* Or a moment captured like a mood perfectly evoked by a phrase of music? No one had ever felt the need to murder a composer, just to safeguard the languages that couldn't compete on equal terms with fugues and sonatas. No one had ever taken a human life just to stop eccentric parents bombarding their offspring with Bach and Mozart in the womb. What made TAP so much more threatening? The fact that it could evoke images and emotions beyond the reach of any symphony? The fact that it was so much *better?*

I'd actually meant most of what I'd said to Dallaporta—but the more I thought about the issues, the more ambivalent I became. No one was trying to "force" TAP onto anyone, except their own children—and to raise a child at all was to impose a set of choices, one way or another. Actively or passively. Consciously, or through sheer conformity or neglect. The prospect of TAP-heads meddling with their children's brains—just so they could share an artificial language—still filled me with instinctive, visceral outrage . . . but was it any more virtuous for the rest of us to insist that no child be given the implant until their brains were fully formed in the ten-thousand-year-old mold of our own Stone Age preconceptions? Weren't *both sides* just attempting to shape future generations in their own image?

And putting aside prejudice, instinct, and nostalgia . . . *which first language really would provide the best tools for dealing with the modern world?*

That was a good question. It just wasn't the one I was being paid to answer.

I planted a dozen small recording devices in pay phones near Dallaporta's apartment, and the school. Which was highly illegal—but both less risky, and more likely to succeed (if he was actually guilty of anything), than trying to bug his home. I'd sampled his voice at the parent-teacher night, so the bugs could discard everyone else's conversations. I cycled by and queried them daily.

I finally tracked down Tom Davies, Grace Sharp's domestic aid—a TAP-head himself. The curtains of the study were always left open, he said. Grace liked to work looking out across the skyline; she'd chosen the apartment for the view.

I couldn't help asking, sarcastically, "Wouldn't it have been cheaper just to visit some rich friend's apartment—and memorize the TAP words for everything she saw?"

He laughed. "Of course. And she could have written scenery *in her* *head* to put any ten-million-dollar harbor view to shame."

"So why didn't she?"

"Do you know how Grace defined 'reality'?"

"No."

"The ten thousand bits that are left when you've argued everything else out of existence."

After weeks of persistent harassment, I persuaded Maxine Ho, one of Third Hemisphere's senior engineers, to talk to me off the record. She stuck to the official line, though: the <<death>> word was impossible. Whatever Grace Sharp had imagined, or whatever TAP sequence some would-be assassin had confronted her with, all the safeguards operated on a separate level, independent of the language protocol—and when the implant had been examined after the autopsy, there'd been no trace of damage or corruption to the relevant hardware or software.

"Of course a neural implant can kill you. A pacemaker can kill you. *A work station* can kill you. Any piece of technology can fail. But if someone died sitting at a work station—and when I took it apart there was no sign of a loose wire or a break in the insulation—I wouldn't say: 'She must have been running the legendary <<death>> program, which instructed the machine to electrocute her.' I'd go looking for another cause of death."

It was a specious analogy. Perfectly functioning TAP implants routinely sent signals to the hypothalamus, which in turn stimulated the adrenal gland; perfectly functioning work stations weren't set up to dispense electric shocks at any dose.

Still, I thought she was being basically straight with me. If she believed that the implant had failed at all, she believed it was a one-in-a-million glitch: less a design flaw than a tragic proof of the intrinsic unpredictability of any real device out in the real world—the kind of thing that would have been excused as "natural causes" if an equally robust biological system had failed.

On March 5, the High Court challenge to the implant restrictions became public knowledge. The case wasn't scheduled to be heard until September—but the reaction to the news was immediate.

Helen Sharp had been right about one thing: her mother's death was seized upon by almost every commentator as proof that a successful challenge would amount to the legalization of infanticide. Not that Their Honors could be influenced by emotive editorials—perish the thought—but even if they weren't, it was clear that the Federal government would be ready with the necessary amendments within days of any decision that put the State criminal law in doubt. I set my knowledge miner digging, but reasoned debate about the merits of the case—the actual merits, not the legal ones—could barely be found outside obscure neurolinguistics journals. (TAP speakers' netzines were in TAP, and I had no translation software.)

The night the news broke, Mick declared, "I want one."

"Then you'll just have to wait six years, won't you?"

"Not if they win."

"If they win, you'd better start mowing lawns and washing windows. Six years should do it either way."

He accepted that without protest—but then asked innocently, "So what's *your* favorite medium?"

"Text. And I know: I'm a boring old fart, but you're still not—" He wore a pained expression—and not just because "old fart" was cringe-inducing baby-talk. I'd missed the point.

"I'm sorry. What were you going to say?"

Mick spoke carefully. "How'd you like it if every time you picked up a book, you had to swallow everything the writer said? If you couldn't stop mid-sentence and think: 'This is . . . *bullshit*.' If you lost the power to argue in your head with every word."

"I'd hate it."

He said, "That's where VR's heading. Without TAP."

I was taken aback by the bleakness of this forecast—but it rang true. Without a language as powerful as the medium, there was little room for argument, little room for doubt. Just unearned suspension of disbelief.

I reached over to the cable that snaked from his headset to the work station, and looped it absent-mindedly around one finger. I said, "If it's as bad as that, then stop using it. It's your choice."

One look answered that; he didn't need to elaborate. *Why should he be forced to abandon his own favorite medium? Why shouldn't he have the chance to salvage it, reinvigorate it, instead?* Present at the birth of spoken language, would I have fought to abolish it, like some fanatical Zen terrorist afraid of its power to deceive? Or would I have fought to enrich it, to balance that power with skepticism and analysis?

I said lamely, "There's more to life than VR."

Mick grinned triumphantly. "Exactly. But there *isn't* more to life than TAP."

I took on other cases: runaway children, minor computer fraud—routine work, but at least it gave me the satisfaction of swift results. Helen Sharp could no longer afford to keep me on full-time—and I'd virtually run out of productive ways to spend her money, anyway. If her mother had died from some unrepeatable glitch, biological or otherwise, nobody would ever prove it. So I offered no false hopes, and worked on the assumption that in a few more months, she'd come to her senses and tell me that the case was closed.

Then, in the middle of April, one of my pay phone bugs finally spoke.

I was dutifully cycling past, checking them all in the pouring rain, though I no longer seriously expected anything. When my notepad chimed the code for success, I almost dropped it into a storm drain.

Playing back the recording on the bike, in the rain, would have been impossible. Playing it back on a crowded train would have been stupid—I didn't have the headphones—but I was tempted. By the time I reached the office, I'd convinced myself I'd hear nothing but a service call: Dallaporta complaining that his home connection was out of order.

I was wrong.

Dallaporta whispered urgently, "You have to help me. I need your advice." It was a monologue; he was leaving a message. "I didn't get rid of it, on the night. I thought: it's not illegal—so why not keep it, just in case?" My skin crawled. He didn't elaborate, but I could guess exactly what he meant: *Just in case it becomes expedient, at some time in the unforeseeable future, to kill another prominent TAP-head.*

He inhaled deeply, as if trying to calm himself. "That was . . . *insane*, I know. I wasn't thinking straight. But now . . . *I can't just throw it in the river!* What if the police are watching me? What if they're going through my garbage?" That was unlikely, but I was grateful for his paranoia—and his incompetence: whispering into a public phone with (I imagined) a hand shielding lips and mouthpiece wouldn't have done him much good if he *had* been under police surveillance.

"I've wiped the code, now." *Shit.* "I followed the instructions, I'm sure it worked. But I have to get rid of the machine. I need to know the best way—the safest way—to do it. *Please.* Call me back at the usual place."

I decoded the number he'd called, from the tones—but it was a commercial message re-routing service—and one that was far too classy to be bribed or hacked.

I sat at the desk, still dripping, trying to decide what to do next. The humidity control system in the north window was pumping water vapor into the room; I'd never get dry unless I went and stood out in the hall for an hour.

Everything I had so far would be less than useless to the police; the illegality of the phone bugs aside, every connection between Dallaporta and Grace Sharp's death remained pure speculation. And I wasn't even sure I had enough to convince Helen Sharp, who didn't believe in <<death>> words. Nothing Dallaporta had said proved that he'd been talking about an infrared communications laser—and the crucial data it had transmitted was probably lost forever, now.

But it sounded like I still had a very slim chance to photograph "the machine," *in situ.*

The message had been left at 6:23 that morning. I glanced at my watch; school would be out in two hours. I had no way of knowing how long it would take for Dallaporta's backers (Natural Wisdom? The Fountain of Righteousness?) to come to his rescue—assuming they didn't just decide to abandon him—but I couldn't risk waiting another day.

I knew I'd be cutting it fine, but I didn't seem to have much choice.

There were six hundred apartments in Dallaporta's building—and the sheer weight of numbers had its advantages. I stood across the street behind a bus shelter and waited for someone to approach the main entrance. When a young man appeared, key in hand, I dashed across the road and caught up with him, breathless, soaked, umbrella-less, fumbling. He let me through without a moment's hesitation. I hung back in the lobby shaking water from my coat so I wouldn't have to talk to him in the elevator; I hadn't had time to prepare any plausible lies, and if he'd so much as asked me how long I'd lived in the building, I probably would have been struck dumb.

Dallaporta's apartment, 1912, had a reinforced security door with an impressive-looking deadlock. I found a utilities room at the end of the corridor, and picked *its* lock easily enough. There was a hatch in the ceiling—and even a ladder standing in a corner of the room. I re-checked the plans of the building on my notepad: not every apartment had a ceiling hatch; 1911 did, 1912 didn't.

I climbed into the ceiling and crawled across the dusty beams as quietly as I could, hoping I hadn't lost my bearings. I lay above apartment 1911, just listening, for almost five minutes—then I realized I'd never be certain it was empty. A baby sleeping, an adult quietly reading . . . I didn't even know who lived there, I hadn't had time to find out.

Cursing silently, I crawled back to the utilities room, brushed myself down, and went and rang the bell to 1911.

I rang three times. No one was home.

I retraced my path, lifted the hatch, lowered a rope into the apartment. My forearms ached as I descended; I hadn't done an illegal entry since before Mick was born. The old buzz was tinged with new anxieties: *I was too old for this cat-burglar shit—and I couldn't afford to lose my license.* But I felt a kind of defiant euphoria, too—*because* everything was harder, *because* I had so much more to lose.

And it would all be one word, in TAP. . . .

The balconies of the two apartments were separated by less than a meter, but they were flush with the outside wall of the building—no overhang at all. I climbed up onto the waist-high foot's-width concrete guard wall, steadied myself by pressing up with my left hand against the balcony's ceiling—then with the right, reached across the naked brickwork of the outside wall and into Dallaporta's balcony. I was lucky; I was on the side of the building facing away from the wind.

I moved a foot across, too, embraced the brickwork tightly, shifted the center of mass of my body a few crucial centimeters—fighting down momentary panic—and within seconds, my right hand and foot were lodged securely between Dallaporta's guard wall and ceiling, and it was far easier to go forward than back. I jumped shakily down onto his cluttered balcony, just missing a pot plant. I glanced at the street, nineteen stories below—and pictured Mick at my funeral, still refusing to talk to his father. There was a chance that someone had seen me cross, but there was nothing I could do about that—and the downpour seemed to shift the odds in my favor: I could barely make out Grace Sharp's building at all, through the curtain of rain.

A sliding glass door separated the balcony from the apartment. It fitted loosely between a ceiling track and a guide rail buried in the concrete floor; it was probably designed to be lifted right out, for ease of replacement—but only when it was unlocked. There was no question of trying to pick the lock; there was no keyhole—just a catch operated by a lever on the other side of the door. By pressing on the glass with both gloved hands, though, I could get enough purchase to raise and tilt the whole door slightly. After almost ten minutes—with my wrists going numb—I managed to work the catch free.

I opened the door a few centimeters, then paused at the threshold, scanning the room for burglar alarms. It was clear.

As I moved into the apartment, I heard footsteps in the corridor, then a key going into the lock. I retreated to the balcony, but it was too late to start climbing back the way I'd come; I would have been in full view. I slid the door closed—I couldn't re-lock it—then dropped to the floor behind a pile of junk.

I heard at least two people enter the apartment, then turn left into the corridor that led out of the living room. I took a button-sized video camera, and stuck it to the frame of Dallaporta's bike, which was leaning against the wall of the balcony. I checked the image on my notepad, then tweaked the direction until I had a clear view of most of the room.

I dropped out of sight again just in time. The intruders—a man and a woman, neither of whom I'd seen before—returned, carrying a cardboard carton about thirty centimeters long. I zoomed in; the labeling suggested a presentation bottle of Scotch. Dallaporta's friends clearly didn't share his paranoia; they *knew* the police weren't watching the apartment. He wanted the laser to disappear—and they'd obligingly turned up to remove it.

The woman said, "You think he wiped it properly?"

The man hesitated. "I wouldn't count on it." I wondered why they hadn't automated the process—but then, it would have been impossible to predict exactly when the opportunity to use the code on Grace Sharp would arise, or how many attempts it would take to hit the target.

"Well, I'm not walking out of here carrying incriminating—"

The man groaned—but he opened the carton. I recognized the laser from the catalogues I'd scanned; most of the bulk was in the precision optics, which doubled as a kind of telescope for checking alignment—the unit was meant for inner city rooftop-to-rooftop communications. There was a small device about the size of a matchbox plugged in to the data port; the man hit a button on the side of the box, and peered at a tiny LCD display.

"Hey, the Jackal got it right! I'm impressed." He laughed. *"'I thought: Why not keep it, just in case?'* The poor cretin really thought he had the <<death>> word—and he could go on playing kill-the-TAP-heads for as long as he liked."

The woman said drily, "Don't be so ungrateful. If he'd known what he was doing, he wouldn't have done it at all."

They left. I pocketed the camera and crossed back to 1911 immediately, not wanting to be in sight when they reached the street. In the ceiling, I had to force myself not to rush; if I was careless, I could still get caught.

In five minutes, I was out of the building. I circled the block, then spiraled out through the surrounding streets, on the slim chance of catching sight of them again.

After half an hour I gave up, and went into a coffee shop to replay the video. I should have been jubilant: I had a clear shot of a communications laser, and a soundtrack with two people discussing *the killing of TAP-heads.*

The only catch was, it didn't sound like they believed in <<death>> words any more than Maxine Ho or Helen Sharp.

I invited Helen Sharp to my office. I showed her Dallaporta's essay, and the geometry of the buildings. I played back the phone call, and the scene in his apartment.

I said, "You're the TAP expert. You want to tell me what's going on?"

She sat in silence for a long time before replying.

"There is one possibility."

"Which is?"

"My mother had the earliest model implant. Right to the end. She never had an upgrade—she didn't trust them to transfer her vocabulary properly. She was afraid she'd lose everything she'd learnt."

"And you think . . . the old models *did* have a <<death>> word?"

"No. But they could be microprogrammed externally."

"You've lost me." That wasn't quite true, but I wanted her to spell it out. I wasn't sure how much I really *did* know about the implant—how much the glowing technical reports might have misled me.

Sharp looked terrible—the fact that she'd just laid eyes on the people who'd arranged the death of her mother was finally sinking in—but she explained patiently: "The basic hardware of any neural net computer is just . . . a big array of interconnected RISC processors. The chip is mass-produced as a commodity—hundreds of millions of them a year—and used in tens of thousands of different devices. All the specific characteristics are added by the *microcode:* low-level instructions that customize the processors to make them behave in certain useful ways. The main software then takes that level for granted—as if it's all hardwired into the silicon. But it's not.

"When they released the first consumer model of the TAP implant, Third Hemisphere was worried that there might be some undiscovered flaw in the microcode. If they'd had to take all the implants out of people's skulls to correct it, that would have been a PR nightmare. So they left a routine in the microcode that gave it the power to accept updates in infrared—to modify any part of itself, given the right sequence of external instructions."

"So there was a special TAP word that could get at all the infrastructure? A word that said: <<Replace the old microcode with *X*>>?"

"*No!* It *wasn't* a TAP word—it was a reserved sequence, right outside the language protocol! It was meaningless in TAP, it could never have been spoken. That was the whole point!"

It seemed like a minor distinction to me—but I could understand why she attached so much importance to it. *The language itself* hadn't killed her mother. The poet hadn't died from a word, after all.

I said, "If that's what happened, though . . . why didn't the engineers who examined your mother's implant find any evidence of it? And if you *knew* all this—"

Sharp snapped back angrily, "*I didn't know she still had the old microcode!*" She looked away. "Nine or ten years ago, Third Hemisphere tried to persuade her to accept a new implant—for free. They'd finally discovered a bug in the original microcode—a minor one, nothing dangerous, but they wanted everyone to start using the later models. They were confident enough about *those* that they weren't externally programmable anymore.

"She wouldn't accept it. She didn't want a new implant, she didn't want surgery. So they offered to update the microcode, to fix the bug—and close the trap door in the process, because I think that was also making them nervous. TAP users could never have spoken the code, even if they'd wanted to—but every consumer device on the planet was starting to put out a flood of infrared. There was always a tiny risk of triggering the modification program by accident.

"I thought she'd had the new microcode for the last ten years. She told me she'd accepted the offer. The records Third Hemisphere supplied to the coroner stated that she had—and the engineer's report confirmed that."

I said, "But if she'd actually refused it, like she'd refused the new implant—because she was afraid it might affect her skills with the language . . . then Dallaporta's message might have done it all in one hit?

Opened the trapdoor, undermined the black box, triggered a massive adrenaline release—then overwritten the evidence by substituting the version she was meant to have had all along?"

"Yes."

"So who'd know enough to program all that?" *Natural Wisdom? The Fountain of Righteousness?* Hardly—though they could always have brought in outside expertise.

Sharp was adamant: "Only one of Third Hemisphere's own software engineers could do it. Someone who'd been involved in the TAP project from the start."

"But they'd have nothing to gain, surely? Why discredit your own work, your own product?"

The *product* belonged to Third Hemisphere, though—not to any group of employees.

And people did move on.

I scanned fifteen years' worth of implant manufacturers' publications; they were full of PR releases gloating about heads successfully hunted.

In March 2008, a firm called Cogent Industries had poached a software engineer named Maria Remedios from Third Hemisphere. That in itself proved nothing, of course—nor did the fact that an earlier article named her as a senior participant in the TAP project.

Cogent did have something to gain, though. They specialized in Virtual Reality hardware—both immersive neural implants, and headset-based units. Third Hemisphere wasn't so much a direct competitor as the source of an entire antithetical philosophy: VR was sold to publishers and advertisers as the path to unconditional suspension of disbelief; TAP was about questioning *everything*, analyzing *everything*. The day every VR user spoke TAP, the most ingeniously crafted—and manipulative—VR experience would disintegrate into a laughable trick with smoke and mirrors. And if that wasn't exactly an imminent threat, Grace Sharp's death had certainly made it more remote than ever.

They could have chosen Dallaporta by the same means I'd used to find him myself: a search for passionate opponents of TAP who also happened to have a clear view of Grace Sharp's study. And whoever had made contact with him could have claimed to be a member of Natural Wisdom, or some other anti-implant group; he'd hardly have cooperated if he'd known the truth. When they'd told him about the High Court challenge—no doubt conjuring up images of a whole generation "lost to TAP"—Grace Sharp's death must have begun to sound like a necessary evil. *One old woman, for the sake of all those children. Death by her own obscene technological perversion of language. Nothing more than poetic justice.*

And Maria Remedios? Had Third Hemisphere treated her badly, left her holding a grudge—or had her new employers pressured her into it?

Even if she'd had grave second thoughts about TAP—and recoiled at the prospect of the implant being given to children—helping to murder an innocent woman seemed like a grotesquely disproportionate response. She could have joined the public campaign against the implant; as one of its creators, the media would have given her all the coverage she desired. And though Dallaporta might have caved in to "moral" arguments offered under false pretenses, Remedios could hardly have failed to understand that Cogent's motives were entirely commercial.

Nine tenths of the picture seemed to have fallen perfectly into place—but it was clear that I was missing something crucial. And too much even of that nine tenths was still pure guesswork. For a start, I had to establish solid evidence of a link between Dallaporta and Cogent Industries—which was going to be tricky, since he didn't even know it existed, himself.

I checked the faces of the man and woman I'd seen in Dallaporta's apartment against all the trade magazine shots of Cogent's employees.

No match.

I fed the Cogent employee names, along with my seventeen thousand TAP-haters, into the cluster analysis software—looking for a connection, however tenuous.

There was none.

So much for the easy options.

I sent Dallaporta a message, via a re-routing service, asking if we could "continue our discussion." The real Lydia Stone was ex-directory—and using a different number than the one she'd given the school would only prove that she was exercising suitable caution.

Three hours later, Dallaporta called me back. He was polite, but very nervous. I said I had some news which would be of interest to him; he didn't actually scream at me to *shut up in case the line was being bugged*, but his body language made it clear that if I so much as mentioned TAP he'd hang up immediately.

I said, "Can I meet you somewhere? We really need to talk, face to face."

He hesitated. He badly wanted me to vanish from his life—but he needed to know what my "news" was. *Why had I taken an interest in him? One old essay was hardly enough to explain it, so . . . how many people in the anti-TAP crusade knew what he'd done? And what did I know about Grace Sharp's death that no one had bothered to tell him?*

Of course he was paranoid. The inquest was long over, the laser had been magicked away—but the fact remained: he'd stood on his balcony on a summer evening and shot a perfect stranger dead. Nothing could ever be the same again.

He said flatly, "Tomorrow night, at the school. Nine o'clock."

* * *

I rehearsed the story in my head as I crossed the football field—which was brightly floodlit for some reason, though there wasn't a soul around. *A friend of a friend in a certain law firm had heard that Helen Sharp had discovered something in her mother's computer files—something which had prompted her to start proceedings to try to gain access to Third Hemisphere's records.*

I was sure that Dallaporta would pass the rumor on to his benefactors; the hardest part would be ensuring that he didn't mention "my" name. So long as he remained tight-lipped about his source of information, they'd have to take him seriously.

Helen Sharp was preparing a forged—paper—letter from her mother to Third Hemisphere, explicitly stating that she did not wish to accept the microcode update. I was confident that we had enough leverage now to persuade Third Hemisphere to play along, and bury the bait in the appropriate warehouse.

Maria Remedios would know at once what the "evidence" had to be. Cogent, acting on her advice, would try to arrange its disappearance. This time, they'd be caught red-handed.

At least, that was the theory.

Dallaporta had said he'd be in the "Resources Center"—which these days apparently meant a large room full of work stations. I'd found a map of the school in an online brochure, so I knew exactly where to go. The door was open, though the lights were out—and as I approached the threshold I could see that all the machines inside had been switched on and connected to some net service or other. *More of Dallaporta's paranoia?* Maybe he thought this was an ideal source of interference for the police surveillance teams who were following him everywhere—though the sound from most of the work stations was turned down to a whisper.

I peered into the greyness of the room, dazzled and distracted by the multitude of images: swarms of tiny red and silver fish weaving through a coral reef; a polychrome computer animation of air flow around some kind of zeppelin; a portrait of a Florentine prince sprouting a speech balloon full of modern Italian; a dead silver-haired twentieth century guru emitting platitudes about the nature of truth. An old music video was playing by the door; the singer droned: "This is the way, step insi-i-ide."

I smiled uneasily at the coincidence and walked into the room—resisting the urge to shout a greeting, mocking Dallaporta's elaborate "precautions." It seemed far more diplomatic to play along. I stage whispered, "It's me. Where are you?"

No reply.

It was hard to get my eyes accustomed to the darkness with forty or fifty bright screens in view; I had no reason whatsoever to look at any of the images—but it was remarkably difficult to keep looking away. I walked slowly toward the far end of the room, irritated but prepared not to show it. I called out again, a little louder; there was still no reply.

An animated supernova erupted just ahead of me—and the sudden blue-white radiance revealed a man slumped in a chair beside the screen. I moved closer, and inspected the body by the light of the dying sun.

Dallaporta had a small-calibre pistol in his hand, and a neat hole in his temple. I put two fingers to his neck; he was certainly dead, but still warm.

I felt a flicker of guilt break through the numbness of shock—but this wasn't the time to agonize over the way I'd treated him. He'd killed Grace Sharp, and he hadn't been prepared to live with that. If the fear of whatever I'd been about to tell him had been enough to drive him to suicide, he would have done it sooner or later, regardless.

I took out my notepad to call the police.

Then the supernova faded, and a new image took its place.

An apartment building, swept by rain. The camera zoomed in on a figure climbing between two of the balconies. The magnification kept increasing, relentlessly—and by the time the woman turned and showed her face, it filled the screen.

My stomach tightened. I glanced back to the neat, too-professional hole in Dallaporta's skull, reassessing everything. *But . . . who could have videoed me?* If Cogent's people had known I was on the balcony, why had they walked straight in?

The image changed again. *Me, planting one of the phone bugs.*

I laughed in disbelief. They'd all but slaughtered this man in front of my eyes—and now they were trying to blackmail me into silence with a couple of petty misdemeanors?

"There are small traces of your skin under his fingernails." The voice came from a meter behind me; I started, but I didn't actually jump. "Not enough for him to have left a mark on you, but enough for DNA analysis."

I turned around slowly. The man was about my age, and only a little taller. He wasn't pointing a gun at me, but he looked suspiciously relaxed.

"The police will find out that Helen Sharp hired you—but they'll have no grounds for a warrant to compel you to supply them with tissue samples. Not if they don't see this." He gestured at the screen.

I said, "And why would they imagine I'd want to fake this man's suicide? Breaking into his apartment proves nothing—"

"I think *that* depends on whether someone tips them off about the hundred thousand dollars in your Swiss bank account. Grace's close-knit linguistic community must have done a little whip-around, and bought themselves some justice for the man with the <<death>> word."

That shut me up. If the account really existed . . . that was breathtaking. *Had Cogent been watching me all along, setting this up?*

He smiled. "If you're good, you can keep the hundred grand, of course.

No tax; the whole thing's organized beautifully through a holding company in Macao."

I didn't have the presence of mind even to be tempted; I was still trying to come to terms with the whole Byzantine scheme.

I said, "Forget it." I walked straight past him, toward the doorway. I reached it, heart racing, then turned and looked back; I couldn't see him anymore, but I didn't think he'd moved a centimeter. Killing me would create too many problems, too many holes in their beautifully scripted VR experience—and the odds were stacked against me even if I did go straight to the police.

I said, "So what did you expect me to tell Helen Sharp? 'Screw your mother, the case is closed—and please don't ask any questions, I'm late for my flight to Macao'?"

"You'll think of something. Believe me, you don't want to fight us."

I laughed angrily. "One pissy little VR company, and you think you can pull all the strings?"

The man said, "I'm not working for Cogent. They have *no idea* you've even taken an interest in them."

I peered into the darkness between the rows of screens. "Some VR industry consortium, then." For some reason I'd started shaking; I think it was rage. "You're still not above the law."

"Oh, there's more to life than Virtual Reality." He sounded amused.

"Yeah? *Who, then?"*

There was silence for a while, then I could see him approaching. "I can't tell you that. But there are some people you can meet—if you want to—who might help you put your doubts to rest."

"Who?"

"Maria Remedios. And her daughter."

"I thought you didn't work for Cogent—"

"*She* works for Cogent. I don't. Though you could say it's my job to watch over them both."

The further we drove from Dallaporta's corpse, the more compromised I knew I'd become—but I couldn't walk away from a chance to learn what it was I'd missed all along. Even if the revelation was intended to guarantee my silence.

"Remedios was one of the first volunteers to test the TAP implant," the man explained casually. "First she'd helped design it—and then she got to experience the results first hand. I think she must have found the reality exhilarating, in a lot of ways—but very frustrating, too."

"Why frustrating?"

"Even with neural hardware, learning an exotic new language is always difficult. For an adult."

I didn't reply. He continued, "She managed to find a good neurosurgeon willing to give her daughter the implant. Not here, though. Overseas. Which simplified things, really—it was easier to turn a blind eye."

That chilled me. "And you let her go ahead and do it? Just so you could see the results?"

He laughed. "Well, not me personally. But that was the general idea."

And the results? I thought back to some of the more pessimistic technical papers I'd read on the subject. Maybe natural languages—which had co-evolved with human intelligence—were crucial for the early stages of intellectual development . . . and even if relatively "artificial" latecomers like sign made perfect substitutes, maybe TAP was just too different to perform the role of organizing the neural structures that made higher thinking possible. And maybe the fact that so much of the language was encoded in *the chip,* instead of the brain, meant that vital conceptual networks were missing—or at least, inaccessible to other regions of the cerebral cortex that needed them in order to mature.

It still made no sense, though. If the daughter was living proof that the implant would do unspeakable damage to the infant brain, why not just publicize that fact? *Why had Grace Sharp died to win a court case that could have been won by simply disclosing the truth?*

Maria Remedios lived in a modestly comfortable house on the north shore. My escort had phoned ahead; she was expecting us. As I followed him down the hallway, she met my eyes; there was unconcealed shame in her steady gaze—but a strange, almost proud defiance behind it. I looked away, confused. If she'd crippled her own child with the TAP implant, no wonder she'd left Third Hemisphere—but why was she so beholden to Dallaporta's killers that she'd let them use her to manipulate Cogent? Had they threatened to imprison her? To put her child in an institution?

We ended up in the living room, but Remedios didn't invite us to take a seat. The man said, "So, what's she been up to? Still spending every last waking moment on the nets?"

Remedios shot him a poisonous look, and didn't bother replying. I thought he was being cruelly sarcastic. Then he turned to me and explained, "Incoming data only, I'm afraid. We wouldn't want her airing her grievances to the world."

Remedios left the room. I heard her say, "Jane? Ms. O'Connor's here." Then she returned, with a young girl in blue-and-white striped pajamas, maybe eight years old.

Jane greeted me and shook my hand solemnly—or mock-solemnly. One look at her knowing gray eyes, and I knew I'd made exactly the wrong guess about the implant's effects.

"I was hoping I'd be allowed to meet you," she said. "Uncle Daniel's been complaining about you for weeks." She glanced at the man, without obvious malice—more like a chess player regarding a formidable adversary. "And he doesn't often let me have visitors."

I didn't know what to say. "Uncle Daniel" interjected helpfully, "I think Ms. O'Connor is still in the dark, Jane. She doesn't understand—"

"Why anyone would want to keep me prisoner? Why anyone would go to so much trouble to keep other children from growing up with TAP?" Her tone went beyond precocity; she didn't come across as some child actor mouthing an adult's lines. Every word simply negated the implications her appearance would normally have conveyed.

And her bluntness was unnerving, but it cut through my own diplomatic hesitancy. I said, "That's right. I don't understand."

Jane smiled calmly. I don't believe she was resigned to her situation—but she was patient. Very patient.

She said, "With the implant, you can *play* words—or *scan* them. Experience them, blindly—or understand them, completely. Uncle Daniel's not a big fan of *understanding*, though. He thinks there are certain words that should be *played* and not *scanned*."

"What kind of words?"

She raised one hand, palm toward me. It was an ironic gesture; she must have known I was oblivious to IR.

"If I play *this* word . . . I feel a boundless sense of loyalty and pride toward my team . . . my city . . . my state . . . my *nation!"* Her face shone with fervent, agonized, almost hysterical joy; she looked like nothing so much as one of the flag-waving school girls they'd whipped into a patriotic frenzy as ornamentation for the 2000 Olympics. "But if I *scan* it . . ." Her expression faded into one of faint amusement—as if someone had just tried to dupe her with a very old, and very obvious, scam.

"*This* word plays as what many religions call 'faith.'" Her face was radiant, but tranquil now. "The peace that passeth understanding." She smiled apologetically. "Except, of course, it doesn't. Scan it, and the mechanics are transparent: one foot down hard on an entrained neurochemical feel-good pedal—with cognitive, aesthetic, and cultural echoes linked to the context in which the training was acquired."

I glanced at Remedios; there were silent tears moving down her face. *They wouldn't lock up the mother, or institutionalize the daughter. They'd kill this child, if they had to. That was the only reason she'd helped them program the death of Grace Sharp.*

"Now, this is what the Buddhists call 'enlightenment.'" Jane closed her eyes and smiled serenely. "Similar raw pharmacology, but the higher-level components are different. There's a kind of heavily self-affirming cognitive myopia: every mental tool that could expose the true nature of the state is explicitly negated."

I thought of James, lost in wordless tranquility. The package he'd swallowed whole, the mind virus fine-tuned by centuries of evolution, declared: *Language is dangerous, language deceives you* . . . because *lan-*

guage could have shown him the way out of the hole he'd dug for himself.

"And *this* is . . . sexual love, desire? Call it what you like, but if you *scan* it—"

Something cut her short. Maybe it was a look from her mother. Or maybe it was the expression on my face.

Jane continued smoothly, "There are others: I won't list them all—but growing up with the implant makes them obvious. And Uncle Daniel's friends don't believe that a subculture with that knowledge would be . . . *conducive* to their idea of social cohesion. They feel very strongly about that." She turned to face him—and her expression now contained more pity than anything else. "And I do understand. Because I've found the word for their affliction, too. I've found the word for the love of power."

By the time I got home it was almost midnight. Mick's room was in darkness, but he was still playing the game; I sat down beside him and removed the headset gently, then reached over and logged him off.

He opened his mouth to apologize, or invent some excuse. I said, "Just shut up and listen."

"What happened? I was worried." I hadn't told him everything—but he knew I'd gone to meet someone connected with Grace Sharp's death.

I tried to speak calmly. "I've screwed up the case. Badly. I've made some stupid mistakes, and now I'm going to have to drop it. Okay? That's all I can tell you. And we're not going to talk about it again."

He stared at me, incredulous. "Why? What did you do?"

I shook my head. "I said, we're not going to talk about it."

He started blinking away tears. I took him in my arms; he didn't fight me, but he said angrily, "I don't *believe* you!"

I said, "Sssh."

Later, I lay on my bed in the dark, rolling between my thumb and forefinger the smooth cold object, like a small ceramic bead, which Jane Remedios had slipped into my hand.

If she'd managed to copy her implant, this chip would encode her entire TAP vocabulary. And to an adult it would be useless—but a newborn child who started *with the knowledge it had taken her eight years to acquire might surpass her in half that time.*

They'd be watching me closely—but they couldn't be watching everyone. I believed I could pass the chip on to someone willing to use it, if I was careful.

So I lay in the dark, and tried to decide.

Between the silence of power and mystification, the unearned suspension of disbelief, *the way things had always been*—and the torrent of understanding that would sweep it all away. ●

NEXT ISSUE

SPECIAL HOLIDAY TREATS

Well, it's *that* time of year again, and, in keeping with long tradition, we're bringing you some holiday stories in our December issue—or, to be more precise, a holiday story and a Christmas poem. Gonzo new writer **Leslie What** returns with the story, giving us all instructions on "How To Feed Your Inner Troll," while **James Patrick Kelly** dons his poet's hat (and very fetching he looks in it, too!) to serve us up some Christmas verse, letting us in on what happens on "Christmas Morning, 2025." Ho ho *ho*!

MAJOR NEW NOVELLAS

Two of our most popular authors are also on hand for December, delivering big new novellas that are sure to be among the most exciting and memorable stories of the year. **R. Garcia y Robertson** takes us on another fast-paced, hair-raising, thrill-a-minute adventure through time, as Jake Bento and his bumbling crew of time-traveling documentary film-makers go on a dangerous tour of the ancient world's "Seven Wonders," pursued headlong by an assortment of pirates, slavers, rogue technologists, whip-snapping leather-clad outlaw queens with Bad Attitudes, and killer robot dogs. From the distant past, **Mary Rosenblum** then takes us to a troubled and impoverished future, where the immense factory ships working the world's oceans may offer a young man his best hope for survival—or shove him onto a greased slide that leads directly to a grisly death, as ambition and destiny clash in the immensely entertaining saga of "The Doryman."

TOP-FLIGHT PROFESSIONALS

Robert Reed takes us to the Moon for a look at a high-tech lunar civilization where almost *anything* is available right off the shelf, for the customer willing to pay the price, in "Tongues"; **Alexander Jablokov** leads us through a subtle pavane of identity, reality, love, and illusion, in a future society where even your own memories may not be your own, in "Fragments of a Painted Eggshell"; and the flamboyant and pyrotechnic **Phillip C. Jennings** takes us along on a riverboat ride jampacked with more surprises than anyone could possibly have counted on, as we book "Passage to Galena."

EXCITING FEATURES

Robert Silverberg's "Reflections," "On Books," poems, cartoons, letters, and an array of other columns and features. Look for our December issue on sale on your newsstands on October 10, 1995.

COMING SOON

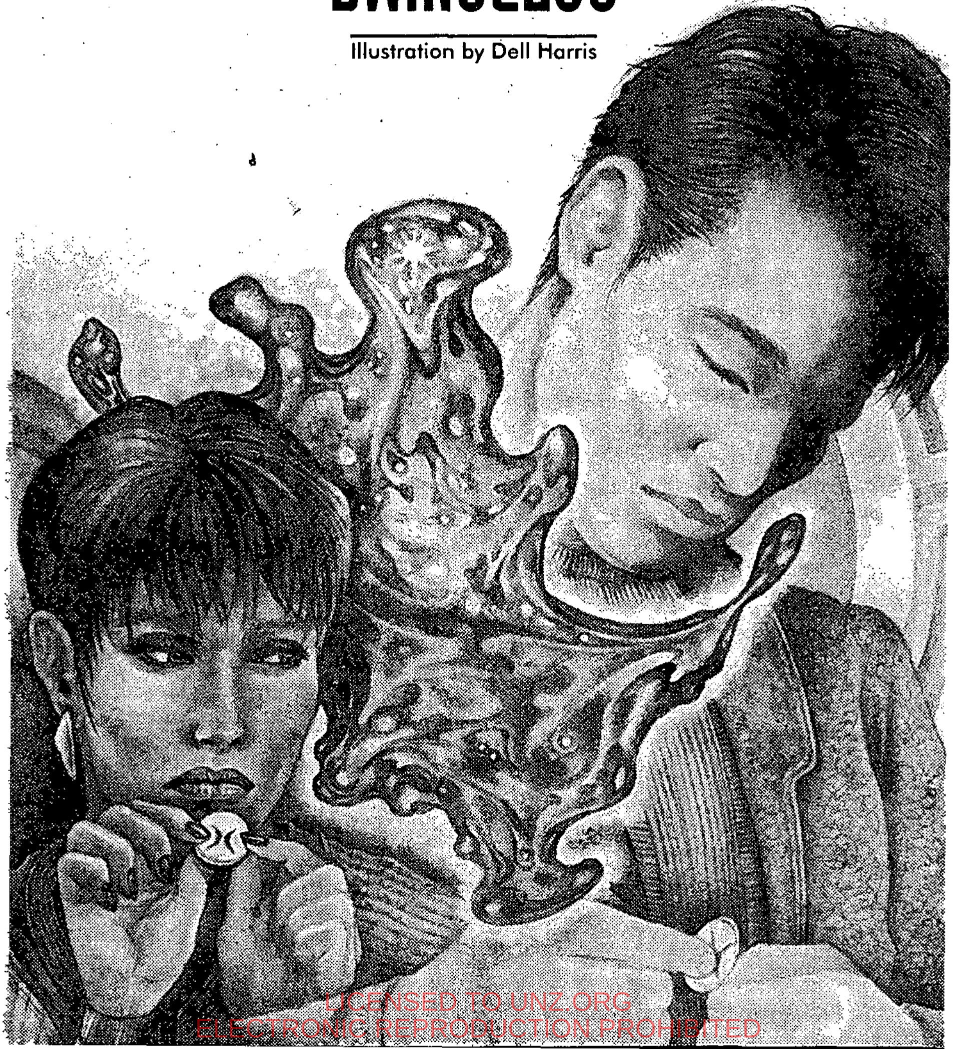
Robert Silverberg, Connie Willis, Walter Jon Williams, Joanna Russ, John Brunner, Brian W. Aldiss, Tanith Lee, Michael Bishop, Robert Reed, Geoffrey A. Landis, Mary Rosenblum, Jack McDevitt, Charles L. Harness, Rebecca Ore, Ben Bova, Phillip C. Jennings, Tom Purdom, and many more.

Tony Daniel

In a brutal world where futures can *literally* be bought and sold, Tony Daniel shows us why there is . . .

NO LOVE IN ALL OF DWINGELOO

Illustration by Dell Harris



Africa was burning when the first *geists* appeared on Kokopelli Station. The aliens could have picked a better time in human history to contact us. The cablelift from Nairobi was, without clearance, shooting up to us double runs, a few thousand souls crammed into wagons meant to hold only a few hundred. I was placed in charge of shuffling the refugees over to other cables. All of them had some degree of old fashioned radiation poisoning. Many of them were seething with retroflux, and an epidemic of the plague on a space station would be horrific. Most of the others were hungry, and would have gutted the station if they got loose (and who could blame them?). As for the others, the Broker Guild's unofficial insurrection front was recruiting, and refugees were prime targets.

So the transfer was very exciting, and demanded all of my attention, and when the first reports of the geists started coming in, they didn't particularly register with me. I believe there was a bit of fanfare for them at the very beginning, but I was entirely preoccupied, and missed it. There was the problem of where in the world to send the African refugees. The St. Louis lift was restricted to visiting traders down Earthside, and *they* had to live in quarantine in East St. Louis and Cahokia. Buenos Aires agreed to several shipments, but the Eugenistas had control of the seaboard, and, after seeing some Link of the New Mandate Barrios in Rio, I was wondering just what they intended to *do* with several thousand Africans. Nevertheless, the diplomatic situation demanded that I send some their way, poor souls.

As usual, Amsterdam needed working bodies—anybody—to shovel fill and hold back the rising sea, so we dropped over half there. Tibet agreed to take about a quarter for prisoner swaps with NAGAN in Libya. Theirs would not be a happy life, but at least it would be a life. And the other quarter, we ended up freezing and orbiting, hoping for better days. There was a glitch with a pod of about three hundred, and for a time the night sky over the Pacific archipelago was lit by African meteors. There were reports on the Link that some even made it through the atmosphere and splashed, iridescent, into the sea.

Then the first wagon full of the dead came up. Each body was carefully beheaded. The next wagon contained severed heads—whether they belonged to the bodies or not, we didn't try to ascertain. And so they alternated, another and another, until we shut the lift down manually, and lost all contact with the central continent.

I had just stepped off a rimshot, and was on my way to my office in the Third Dictate Magistracy when I saw my first alien. I thought for an instant that it was a breach in the hull and I prepared myself for death. But there was no sucking wind, and, as my heart stilled, the geist approached me. It was like a floating nanoscreen, but it was as amorphous as a giant amoeba. It seemed to be infinitely deep when looked at head-on, but when you passed it, there were no sides, and when you turned around to look at it, it was gone. In fact, you could walk through it from behind and feel nothing, then turn around, and there it would be. For me, they had no discernible smell; although others had reported a faint stench, or the tang of ionized air. Inside the geists were colors, textures and—

Humans. Your friends and relatives. And these friends and relatives would talk to you. But all a little *wrong*. Your mother was young, perhaps, but she wore clothes that were in fashion now. Or your friend from childhood might be an old man. Or she might be a three-year-old who could barely speak. These images, these visages, shifted constantly. Each would say a word, several words, and then the channel would change, the frequency shift, and another would take their place. In this way, the aliens spoke to us in our native languages. Since their selection was limited, it was, unfortunately, a speech riddled with clichés and catch-phrases, yet meant with completely serious intent.

For the first few people with whom the geists spoke, the experience was unsettling, and it drove at least one man to insanity. Most people could not get used to it at all. Getting over the emotional response to the visages, the voices, was the difficult part. And the way to do that was to realize that the aliens absolutely did not comprehend or care about the tide of feelings their method of communication unleashed in listeners.

As for me, the adjustment was minimal. It is not, I like to think, that I have no feelings, just that I had no family and few friends. The geist that I first met used the history teacher from DePaul University who was also my academic advisor and mentor as its first image, alternated with a prostitute from Bangkok (where I am originally from) with whom I'd thought I was in love, and my brother, whose face I only knew from some damaged sculptagraphs. For a moment I was startled, for I thought it was, instead, a reflection of me.

"Hello, Haliman Yorasi," said Dr. Myers. "We were informed that you will make significant contributions to—

"—some people who are coming tomorrow—" spoke Mala, my beautiful, doomed fancy of youth.

"—to a meeting to make a deal with the whites," my brother said.

"The whites?" I asked, surprised by my brother's resemblance to me and his words.

"Excuse me, I misspoke," Dr. Myers replied. "I should have said, 'the geists.' Ourselves, I mean."

I will spare you a description of the alternations henceforth, but, as I say, they ceased to have much meaning for me after a few similar discussions, and I began to think of the alien itself as the speaker who addressed me.

"I'm sorry, but you must be mistaken," I said.

The geist said nothing for a long moment, and, as I thought it was done speaking with me, I made to go on my way, but as I took a step, it moved backward with me, and stayed in front of me. As I later discovered, I could move briskly down a hall and the geist would match my every move.

"Are you not on the Ethics Committee of the Interlocking Finance Directorate?" asked the geist.

"Well. Yes," I replied. I stopped walking, out of respect, but of course this meant nothing to the geist. "But that committee is not of much importance. In fact, I don't believe we ever met. . . ."

"Unless we are very much mistaken, and certainly that is not the case, the Ethics Committee has the hot potato in this regard and will make initial policy."

I considered what the geist said. Its statement did follow the unofficial axiom of all public service positions. As my mentor, Dr. Myers used to tell me—

"Even in space, shit flows downhill," said Myers-geist.

"Well, what can I do for you? Should we find a more convenient place to talk?"

"Sorry, my dear?"

"Some place private?"

"Are you planning to lie?"

"Of course not."

"Then here is fine."

"Fine."

"Fine." Since we were in a cylindrical hallway, there was no convenient corner to step into. I did stand somewhat to the side of the corridor, although the exchange drew curious glances from all who passed by.

"We wish to ease the business process along by whatever means necessary, and in that regard we would like to grease the wheels at this point as regards your participation."

"Come again?" I couldn't believe what I was hearing. I mean, it is common, even customary, for Kokopelli officials to supplement their service income with various gratuities and unofficial fees, but I had never been approached in so blatant a manner. And then the geist went even further.

"Here is a bribe." For a brief instant, the amoeba expanded, filled the entire hallway. And then, it contracted, as a pricked muscle will in reflex. Directly in front of the geist, and between it and myself, a disk appeared—a metallic disk. It fell to the floor, bounced against the molefoam carpeting, and settled at my feet.

"My dear, er, friend, I don't know what to say. This is highly unusual."

"But heartfelt," said the geist.

"What, I say, what is your name?"

There was another pause. This time I stood my ground and waited the geist out.

"You may call me The Dwingeloo Time and Life Company," said the geist. "It is a pleasure doing business with you, Haliman Yorasi."

And with that, the geist blinked out of my existence. I picked up the metallic disk, and went about my duties.

Dwingeloo, as most humans were destined to learn, was our own name for a galaxy in the Milky Way's local cluster. About ten million light-years from here, it is obscured by the dust and gas at our galaxy's center, and only visible by radio telescope. It was discovered two centuries ago using such a telescope located at Dwingeloo in the old Netherlands. The aliens were "from" Dwingeloo only in a manner of speaking—in the same way you and I are "from" the Pangaeia supercontinent.

The Secretary and General Board of Trade had a great many problems on its hands at the particular moment the geists chose to show up, and, as some of us were shortly to surmise, the geists had planned it this way. There was fighting in the East Rim, where the Broker Guild had their strongest support from the free traders and the franchise networks. Although we were kept from officially confirming this, it was a *de facto* civil war. Strange how humanity had been waiting centuries for contact with another sentient species, and when they came we relegated them to a third-tier committee in the provisional government of a space station.

But the geists chose *us*—Kokopelli Station—as their contact point. Nobody really knew why, and I heard through the grapevine that the Secretary grew quite incensed when he learned that he couldn't pass this particular problem along to some other potentate. Not that anyone on Earth was in a better condition to welcome the aliens.

After my encounter with my first geist, I spent a grueling day at the office, mopping up the African operation. I took a rimshot home to the Brown and Green District, where I lived. It was a nice neighborhood; the apartments had good views and there were parks and good people, most of whom were middle managers and professionals, like myself. What we lacked in great culture, we made up for with an effective local government—I was a council member—and relative safety, when compared with both the richer and poorer districts.

My apartment was spare by any standards, I must admit. I ordered up dinner—pasta with alfredo sauce—and sat down in the living room to join the Link. In the evenings I liked to lie back and let the couch massage me while I caught up with the day's polling and news. The metallic disk that the alien had given me was in my pocket and as I reclined, I felt it cool against my thigh. I know it sounds strange, but events had overtaken me, and I had completely forgotten about the disk.

I took it from my pocket. The disk was the size of a large coin, and gold, with a silvery tint when held to the light. One side was utterly smooth. It had virtually no thickness. I turned it over. There were two indentations on the other side, like two crescent moons, or two thumbnail prints, each turned with their curving sides toward one another and toward the center of the disk. I ran my finger over the marks.

What could the alien have been thinking? Even if the disk were pure platinum, it would not be worth enough to influence a major policy decision. In fact, I *could* take the pettiness of the bribe as an insult, were I so inclined. Perhaps there was more to the disk—some inactivated nano, or interior circuitry. I twisted on it slightly, to see if there were any give to it—

—I was drinking orange juice, while Bina got ready for work. She had to go in early today to prepare to present a paper in conference, and she'd awakened jittery and frightened. We'd made love while I was half unconscious, and she seemed to draw my calm and untroubled sleep into herself, even as it left me and I awoke to her skin and kisses and sighs. Now she was humming softly as she clasped her bra and moistened her brown skin with lotion—

Stunned, I let go my pressure on the disk—and the world returned. What startled me was not the realism of the vision I'd had. The nano ensconced in my head, in practically everyone's head, could interact with the Link feed and provide as real an experience as one could want. There were madmen and criminals who were perpetually Linked and never knew. But this vision was different. It took me a moment to realize why.

Memories.

Feelings that were mine, but feelings that I'd never had before. Associations, likes, dislikes that were *true*—as true as any I had in this, my other life. The vision was *real*. As real as here and now. As true as life. And love. There was a woman named Bina whom I loved with all my heart.

I twisted the disk back to that vision.

We lived in a small space—smaller than my apartment in the Brown and Green—but still on Kokopelli Station. There were more people living up-cable, thousands and thousands more. Still, this was just a trickle of refugees compared with the billions who had died below. Earth was horribly worse, and it was then that I realized I was seeing the *future*.

The squabbles and wars of the present had played themselves out and we'd done it, we'd ruined the planet. The seas were biohazard cauldrons, seething with an ecology of war viruses. The land was haunted by nanoplasms, the primal form that life had taken, been reduced to. Sea and land were at war—over nothing, any longer—just a meaningless perpetual struggle between viral life and nano algorithms caught in a perpetual loop. Those who crafted the weaponry were dead.

A few million humans survived on the coasts, in the land between the warring elements. They were temporarily immune to the nano, but none could say for how long, since the nano evolved, its sole purpose finding ways to beat back the living, zombie sea—and, incidentally, to remake whatever people remained into a substance that could not wield a gun and could not think to use one.

Yet I found myself completely, unshakably content. Kokopelli was safe. We had severed all but one cablelift, and created defenses that kept the muck below at bay. In fact, Bina had been one of those responsible for our salvation. I didn't understand how it worked, and I didn't want to. I had my job and I had my love.

She was unlike me in so many ways—impetuous, severe with herself, angry at the world. When we first met, I was a kind of respite for her, a sanctuary. She'd spent ten years in a hurtful marriage to a theoretical physicist who grew jealous and sought to limit her work when she began to eclipse him. In many ways, I was her reaction against that man. But I didn't care. And, in time, she grew to depend upon me in other ways. *Grew,* Bina herself said, as a vine.

"You are like a trellis to me, Haliman," Bina told me. "You seem ordinary enough—"

"I am," I said.

"Yes, you are then. But you are constant. I wind around you and through you—" Here she placed a finger to my lips, touched the sides of my face with her cool, brown hands. "—I would collapse into a tangled mess without you. You're always there, beneath every thought I have."

And I depended upon her. Before Bina, I had had only my job, and the faint satisfaction of doing adequate work in a difficult situation. Now there was waking up to her caress in the morning, feeling her absence all day long as a sweet bitterness that evening would wash away—and there were the nights.

Bina brought her day home with her—her frustrations, her triumphs—and transformed them into passion. She looked somewhat like the fantasy of my youth, the Bangkok prostitute, and so there was always something salacious, something forbidden about entering her, even wanting her. I could not grow bored.

Yet there was so much more. Bina held nothing back, neither her mind nor her heart. She led me to such places as I would never have found on my own, or with anyone else. Places, feelings—I cannot say, cannot explain.

She emerged from the bedroom wearing only pants and a bra, glistening still from the lotion she'd applied.

"Do you think the paper will go well?" she asked me. This was a ritual, but she never tired of it.

"Didn't the last one go well?"

"Yes," she said, her voice small, her eyes sparkling. "Because you said it would, it did."

I put down my orange juice, pulled her to me. The fragrance of lotion, and beneath that, the faint trace of young leaves in spring, Bina's natural smell.

"Well then," I said, "I declare that you will do extraordinarily well today, better than you ever have before." I kissed the curve of her stomach, rubbed my stubbly face against her side. This tickled her, and she laughed, and then kept on laughing after I'd stopped, until I'd pulled her into my lap and kissed her. After a moment, she kissed back, hard and deep. She nibbled on my neck.

"Bina, you wanted to go in early. . . ."

"No." She pulled open my shirt and kissed a shoulder.

"Yes, you said so last night."

"I was too sleepy to know what I was saying."

"I think you were wide awake."

But we had passed the point of reason. Her hands were on my chest, on my pants. I unclasped her bra and suckled at her breasts.

We stumbled together to our little bedroom, folded down the bed, and fell on it, and upon each other. As we made love, as I nudged and rubbed into the curves and spaces of her body, the leafy, budding smell rose from her, more and more intense. On Kokopelli, there were no seasons, but every time we made love it was the spring—the spring that would never come again. It was always the same, yet always new and growing, living forth. We redeemed what we could of Earth's life. I spent myself in her like the April rain; she came around me with the swelling bloom of May.

After this, my day at work was a pale shadow existence, and coming home meant coming back to life.

Or emptiness. I untwisted the disk and was alone in my apartment. I'd never known how lonely I was until this moment, and now there was no way I could ever forget. I could never forget Bina.

I'm afraid I quite neglected my job over the next few shifts. There was much extra work to do, too, and I risked having my subordinates claim much of the credit and overstep me in advancement. When this had occurred before, it irked me considerably. I'd lain awake tallying my mistakes and resolving never to let such a thing happen again. Now I did not care whether I were promoted or not. For the first time in years, I worked only my required hours. I spent all my leisure time in the vision provided by the disk. Of course I questioned this, thinking that I was under the influence of some sort of drug or brainwashing. But there was no coercion, no longing that was not wholly my own natural desire.

And I knew that if the aliens demanded the disk back, that I could and would give it to them. I had not forgotten my place or the position I was in. If they had thought to buy me with such a gift, they had miscalculated. Using the disk—living in that world—concentrated and enhanced my judgment. I felt a whole man when I was in the vision, and the effect lingered, for a while at least, when I was not. I resolved, however, to make as much use of the disk as possible, so that I could always remember, should they reclaim it.

In due time, the Ethics Committee on which I sat convened to listen to the geists' proposal. We met on the other side of the station, and I had to take a rimshot around half the perimeter to get there. There was only one Link analyst outside the meeting, and he contented himself with asking us to respond to the latest poll results concerning the aliens. Since nobody really knew what the geists wanted, the numbers meant little, and I said as much.

The meeting room was nondescript. There was a roundtable with closely spaced Link pads. A geist glowed somberly near the table, and we took seats around it. Our committee chair was Esmerelda Hillyer-Ortega, who held a position comparable to mine in the Second Dictate. Several members were late in arriving, and Hillyer-Ortega apologized to the geist. It replied using images of dark-haired people and one woman who was very light and blonde. Hillyer-Ortega seemed a bit shaken by the blonde woman's appearance.

Then Bina came in.

She was younger. I could tell by looking at her that she was troubled and trying not to show it. This was the way she always looked before a difficult presentation. With her was a tall man with closely cropped hair. Pendergrass, the devil.

I found myself staring, and touched the Link pad. Instantly, the room shrank to a corner icon, and a list of committee members popped up, accompanied by pictures. I selected Bina's image.

"My name is Tabrina Singh," it said. "I'm a research associate in the Bank of Toronto's statistics division, Kokopelli Branch."

Personal information, I shamelessly requested.

My inquiry would be recorded and Bina would get a note saying as much.

"I'm thirty-two years old. I was born on Kokopelli, and grew up in the Khushwant District. I live now in Extension Eight. My parents were from England. We are Pakistani. I went to the University of California in Los Angeles for my undergraduate degree, and completed my Ph.D. at the London School of Economics. I'm married to Dr. Gerald Pendergrass. We have no children."

Complete entry. Inquiry noted. Anything else?

"Let's get underway," say Hillyer-Ortega. I reluctantly exited the Link. She made a speech welcoming the geist.

She turned to the rest of us. "Ordinarily, I would introduce and try to create a context for a guest's appearance before this committee, but, in this case, I am as curious as the rest of you as to what our . . . speaker . . . has to say." She sat down. The alien immediately split into as many geists as there were committee members. The geists were about the size of a desk viewscreen, and each hovered before someone's face.

"To get straight to the point," said my geist, "it is our fervent desire to establish in this system a branch of the Dwingeloo Time and Life Company." The alien was silent for a moment.

"Er, what services does your company provide?" asked Hillyer-Ortega. At the first sound of her voice, all the geists around the table became translucent, and the committee members could see one another through them.

"You may very well wonder what service our company can provide," replied the geist, back to opaque images. "Never fear. It is comprehensible by you and that's why we're here."

The image within my geist, my brother, faded, and was replaced by a picture of a foggy sea of lights, concentrated to a brightness in the very middle. Stars perhaps? A galaxy? Suddenly the core of the lights emitted a pulse of energy that rippled through the other lights, changing their sizes and colors as it progressed. Very pretty. Then back to Dr. Myers.

"Time, as your species has deduced, is not a line. In fact, time has what you may call infinite dimensions. In fact, you might very well say that everything is happening all at once. In fact, you might say that the universe is both moving and being still, that forever is the same as now. What is real to us is what we choose to see."

"Choose?" Bina said. Her husband shot her a petulant glance, as if she'd spoken out of turn. But she was just as much a member of this committee as he was. "We *can't* choose. We are constructed a certain way and we see what we see. This is a crude way of speaking. The mathematics is quite clear, however—"

And the geist cut her off. Did it mean to? There was no way to tell. "Ah yes. Well, no. Actually, if we could just—" My geist flashed a series of equations within itself, their symbology glowing in neon colors.

"And to get right to the point," it continued. "We have some initial investments to make in your system. A virtual immolation energy device, for instance, that should supply your foreseeable needs until the end of time."

"I thought you said time had no end," one of the committee intoned.

"Yes, well, you know what I mean," the geist replied. "In whatever case, this will prepare you for full entry into our local economy, and eventually into the Intergalactic Prosperity Alliance."

"Excuse me," I said.

"Yes, what can we do for you, sir?" said the geist.

"I was just wondering. If you can take care of our energy needs, I assume you and the . . . others . . . are taken care of as well?"

"This is true, and furthermore—"

"—then there *is* no economy. There is no relative scarcity or abundance. Money is meaningless without them."

"Good point," said the geist. "Well taken."

"Yes," Bina said. "So you are giving us some kind of rechargeable black hole. What could we possibly provide you in return?"

"Your future," said the geist.

"Come again?"

"The Dwingeloo Time and Life Company deals in futures," it said. "As a matter of common knowledge, futures are the monetary unit of the local cluster. An option is what one future is called. Like a yen or dollar. At the moment, your system is worth about thirty billion options."

The geist went on at some length, explaining how the universal economy worked. It was similar, in some ways, to the Hindu concept of karma, only with no moral component whatsoever. All of the choices that we *don't* make, both as individuals and as larger groups, are tallied in a kind of possibility bank. For us, the bank is like a piggy bank that we drop coins into, but which we can never open. The geists had a way of cracking it open. And with that fund of coins we'd saved—with those unused options—we could *invest*. Others could use our options, and pay us interest, in the form of more options, for the service. Also, we could borrow, the alien mentioned in passing.

But we could not only use options that we hadn't taken in the past. We could invest our *future options* as well. In fact, past options were merely nickels and dimes compared with the futures. The marketplace for futures *was* the universal economy, and, in a sense, we carried the past around in our pockets as mere change.

Bina closely questioned the geist on the mathematics of this point, and she seemed satisfied with the answers, but I must confess that the discussion was far over my head. Oh, I understood the concept well enough. And the disk, my bribe, began to make sense to me. Options let you buy a desirable future life. You could borrow, and buy a better life than was, at least in your perception, possible before. If you invested wisely, then you would produce a future rich in even more options, and you could pay the loan back and have plenty of options to spare. You might even loan some out yourself, and get an even better future for your money.

I waited until Bina was through, then asked another question. "What if someone were to invest poorly, and create a future with only a few options? What if they couldn't pay back Dwingeloo?" I asked.

"Well, then, we would call in whatever we could and write off the loss."

"You would call in whatever they had?"

"Yes, essentially. We zero balance them."

"And they would have no further options?"

"No. That state is impossible."

"But, you just said—"

"They would cease to exist. They would cease to be and cease to *have been*. They wouldn't be missed, because no one would ever have known them. Not even us, by the way. It's a risk we take."

"Very brave of you."

The geist evidently had no concept of sarcasm. "We like to think of it as the cost of doing business."

The committee decided, as was expected, not to decide anything at the moment. This seemed to content the geists, who acted as if they had all the time in the world. As we left the room, Pendergrass and Bina were arguing—well, actually Bina was listening as Pendergrass chided her on several points she'd raised. The gist was, I took it, that she'd awkwardly stated some of the points she made, and the aliens might think us mathematically primitive because of her. I bided my time, and walked out with them.

"I'm going right past Extension Eight on my way home," I said. "Perhaps we could share a ride?" Ah, what stupidity, I immediately thought. How could I know where they lived?

Pendergrass stared at me for a moment. "Oh yes, you were the contentious gentleman on the committee," he said. "Well, we *are* going that way—"

"Splendid. I'll order a rimshot." I stepped over to a Link pad on the corridor wall. What was I doing? This could only lead to no good. But I called up the capsule.

Note: Inquiry into Level One Personal Information was initiated by Tabrina Singh 421050432 at 1348.24 KST, Access provided. Trace code available upon request, the Link informed me. So, Bina had asked about me, too.

We had a good twenty minute ride ahead of us. Of course, the trip only took me further out of my way home, but that was unimportant. I wanted to spend at least a few moments of my real life—the life I was in now—with Bina.

Once we were inside, Bina immediately addressed me as if I were a friend with whom formalities could be dropped. This seemed to bother Pendergrass, but I paid him no mind.

"Did they give you one of these?" asked Bina. She pulled a metallic disk identical to mine from her pocket.

"Yes," I said.

"We've discussed that," said Pendergrass. "Those are merely a way of overawing us with their technical superiority. Obviously, it is some kind of fantasy, wish-fulfilling device, a fancy drug if you like." He took the disk from Bina, turned it in his fingers, tossed it back. "That offer they made . . . unlimited energy. Does anyone but me realize how incredible it is?"

"I do," I said. "I believe I realize many things."

"This is an option," Bina said, fingering the disk. "I'm sure of it."

"It's a hundred thousand option note," I said. "Perhaps more."

"What are we to make of this? What could they want from us that is worth this much . . . money?"

"Nothing," said Pendergrass. "You're jumping to conclusions, as usual, my dear. And what if it *is* valuable in the larger scheme of things? Why, then, we're rich—for all the good it will do us." He chuckled. "I'm not planning on buying a *star* any time soon. What would I do with it?"

"What he said is true," I replied. "*Nothing* is what they want."

"We are the ones who asked the questions, you and I," said Bina.

"You are the only person on the committee who really understands the technical side of what is going on."

"I beg your pardon," Pendergrass cut in. "I'm perfectly aware of the implications of what was discussed."

I looked at Pendergrass coolly. "Yes," I said. "Pardon me."

"So all we have to do is keep our mouths shut and let them go about business as usual," Bina said. "Let them set up their bank, or whatever."

"Then we deposit our funds."

"And the future . . . happens. The one we want; the one we pay for." Bina looked at me, looked me over, as if she were drinking me in. As if this were the last chance she'd ever have to be with me. She's seen the same vision as I have, I thought. She has loved me in another life.

"I wonder how much thirty billion options is in real money," she said. "I wonder who will decide how to invest it."

"Oh, I think this is too important a matter for our little committee," said Pendergrass. "We'll have to kick this one upstairs."

"That's what I'm afraid of," Bina said. "That's what I'm afraid of."

She rubbed her hands together, the way she did when she was truly worried. "I want to clean them," she once told me. "The more stress I'm under, the dirtier they feel to me."

"A power source that cannot be depleted, powering a war that never ends," I said. "Seems like a good way to keep generating a few options. Maybe not many. But what a safe bet, eh? Like buying bonds."

When she looked up at me, tears were in her eyes. "Did you see it, too?"

"Stuff and nonsense," said Pendergrass.

"I saw it," I said. "And I saw other things."

Now she was crying outright. Pendergrass huffed. I reached over, touched her hand. "Bina, we were so happy. Anything else would—"

"It can't be," she said. She took my hand, turned it over and ran her finger along my palm.

"I say!" Pendergrass exclaimed.

"Oh, Haliman," she said. "When you *know* the future, there are some things that must cancel each other out, and some things *must* be. It's in the math, in the logic. If we take the bribe, the horror we saw will happen."

"Precisely because we've taken the bribe."

"Yes," she replied, and let go my hand. "In the future."

We parted at the Extension Eight transfer. She held out her small hand. I did not shake it. I could not. And then I watched her walk away—watched her light and beautiful gait, the sway of her shoulders and hips. It was all so familiar. Never was. She turned a corner. Never will be.

I took the next rimshot and flew around Planet Earth three times, before I finally returned to my apartment. Why not? I was a rich man, after all.

The Dwingeloo Time and Life Company established a branch office within days of gaining permission from the Ethics Committee. I have no idea if the vote were close, or what the discussion was. I attended no more meetings.

But I was first in line when the geists opened up. The office was a simple room, with a chair for me. A geist hung in the air before me—a geist phalange, actually, poking through my reality like a fingertip, radiating from one of the central beings, who were as invisible as time to us.

"Dwingeloo wants to be your neighborhood bank," said the geist. "Here at Dwingeloo, we operate on a handshake, so to speak, and our good faith in one another."

"That is acceptable," I said. I took the metallic disk from my pocket. "I have two transactions to make."

"You wish to cash in your options," the geist replied. "We will be pleased to serve you."

"No."

"Bring it back again? You wish to borrow more, then? Well, seeing as you're a good customer—"

"I want to make an investment," I said. "I wish to place half the amount of this note in a high-yield account. I will accept whatever risk applies, of course. Do you have anything like that?"

The geist was silent. The phalange was integrating with the parent being, getting its order on how to proceed. I waited.

"Well, according to Intergalactic Accord, I am compelled to inform you of the investment instruments we offer," it finally said. "But I should also warn you that it is possible to lose more than the amount you invest. In that case, we would be forced to call in your other options."

"As I stated, I'm prepared to take that risk."

"Very well." The disk flashed in my hands, and then disappeared. "And how do wish to handle the other two million options, Haliman Yorasi?"

"I want to bribe you with it," I said.

"Come again a second time?"

"I am tired of working for Kokopelli Station. I want a change. I want a position with Dwingeloo. Middle management will be fine."

"Haliman Yorasi, surely you cannot—" But this time the parent being pulled the phalange back to *it*. All of this would one day be utterly familiar to me. It was gone a long while. I waited. I had plenty of time and nothing better to do.

The geist blinked back into existence. "Sure thing," it said. "When do you want to start?"

After five years, I have been kicked upstairs. Now I am on my way to a new position at headquarters. I am on my way to Dwingeloo. I travel—although that is not quite the word for it—in an invisible capsule of events that did not happen. Mutual exclusion powers the stardrive.

I did quite well for Earth, I must say, even at the risk of appearing to gloat. I took on our systemic account, after about a year of learning the ropes, and turned it around. It had fallen into a sorry state under geist management, whether deliberate or not. I find that the geists and I have a lot in common, actually. They are not evil; they are just good businesspeople. When I showed them that Earth could turn a tidy profit without war and ruin, they were quick to come around and do things my way. In fact, the home office decided it needed more go-getters like me in upper management.

So now, fair Dwingeloo lies before me. The Milky Way glows fiercely behind me, but I have taken my last backward glance. I will never see Bina again. What is the use? And if we did meet in some secret way, and lived in some hidden room the life that might have been, would we not run the risk of making it actually so? When you know the future, there are some things that cancel one another out, some things that must not be.

And so I ride to the corporate office in a ship of lost loves, broken promises, and stifled passion. Oh yes, out here among the stars, it's business as usual. And there is no love in all of Dwingeloo. ●

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IN KAFKAVILLE THE FUNERALS RUN ON TIME

He was out of town when the word came down.
"Officially Dead," was all it said.
Except, of course, for a similar name, the same
but for a doubled "E" where the "Y" should be.

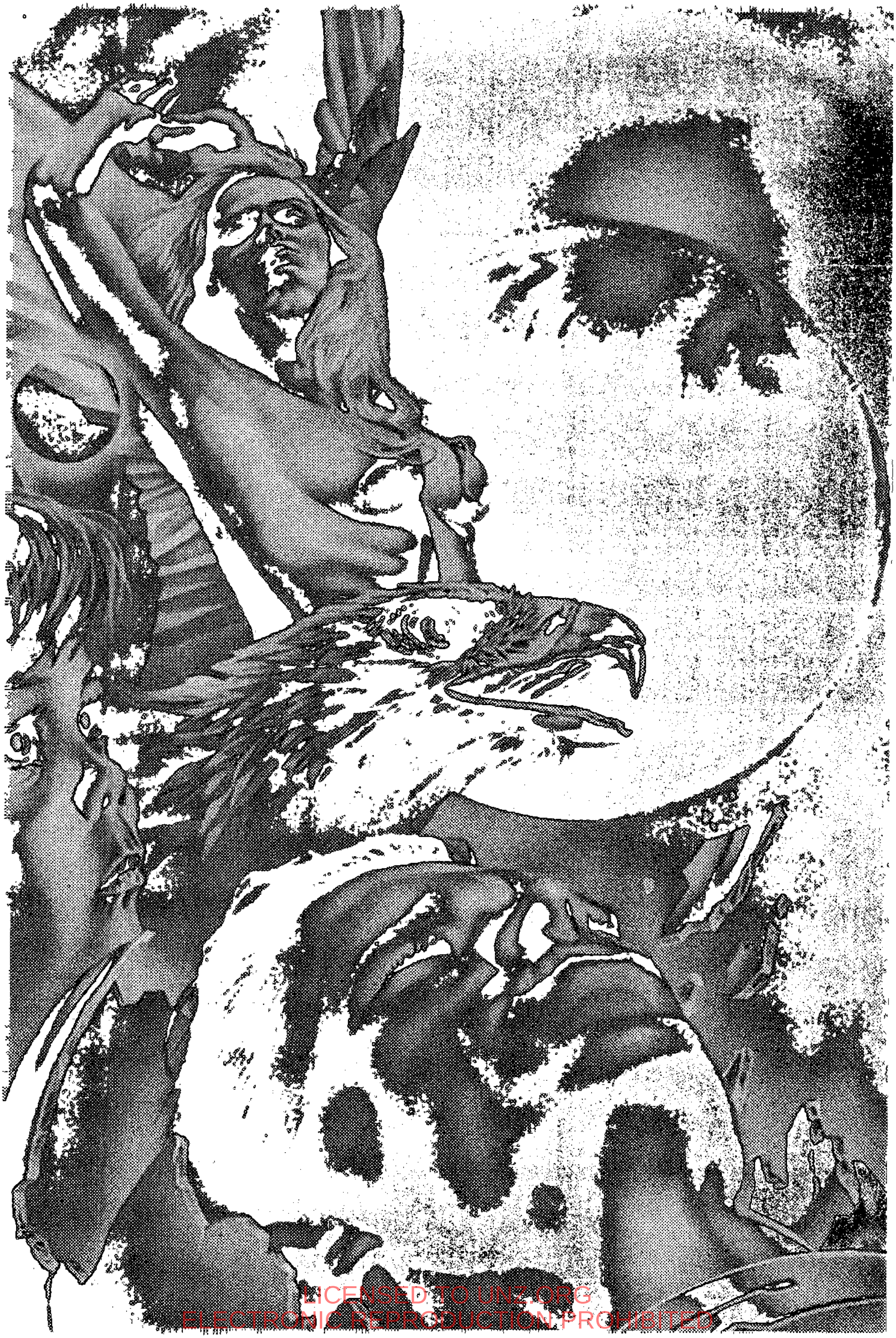
When he came home, he was dead and gone
to all he knew, officially through
with the need for anything. All agreed
it was a shame a misspelled name
could take away so much in such a permanent way.

They said it was hard that a credit card
should depend so greatly on not being lately
deceased, and a source of grief that any relief
should be denied just because a man had officially died.

But dead he was to the bank, and rank
as it was to be left for officially dead, all said
that right or wrong, a month's too long
for the dead to rise and claim a false demise.

It must be said, indeed, that greed
to keep what his will had left may have them deaf
to his pitiful pleas that he was not deceased,
when with a hurried prayer for what he'd left, he was officially buried.

—William John Watkins



Robert Reed

AEON'S CHILD

Aboard a monumental generation starship, two colossal adversaries engage in an epic battle for survival . . .

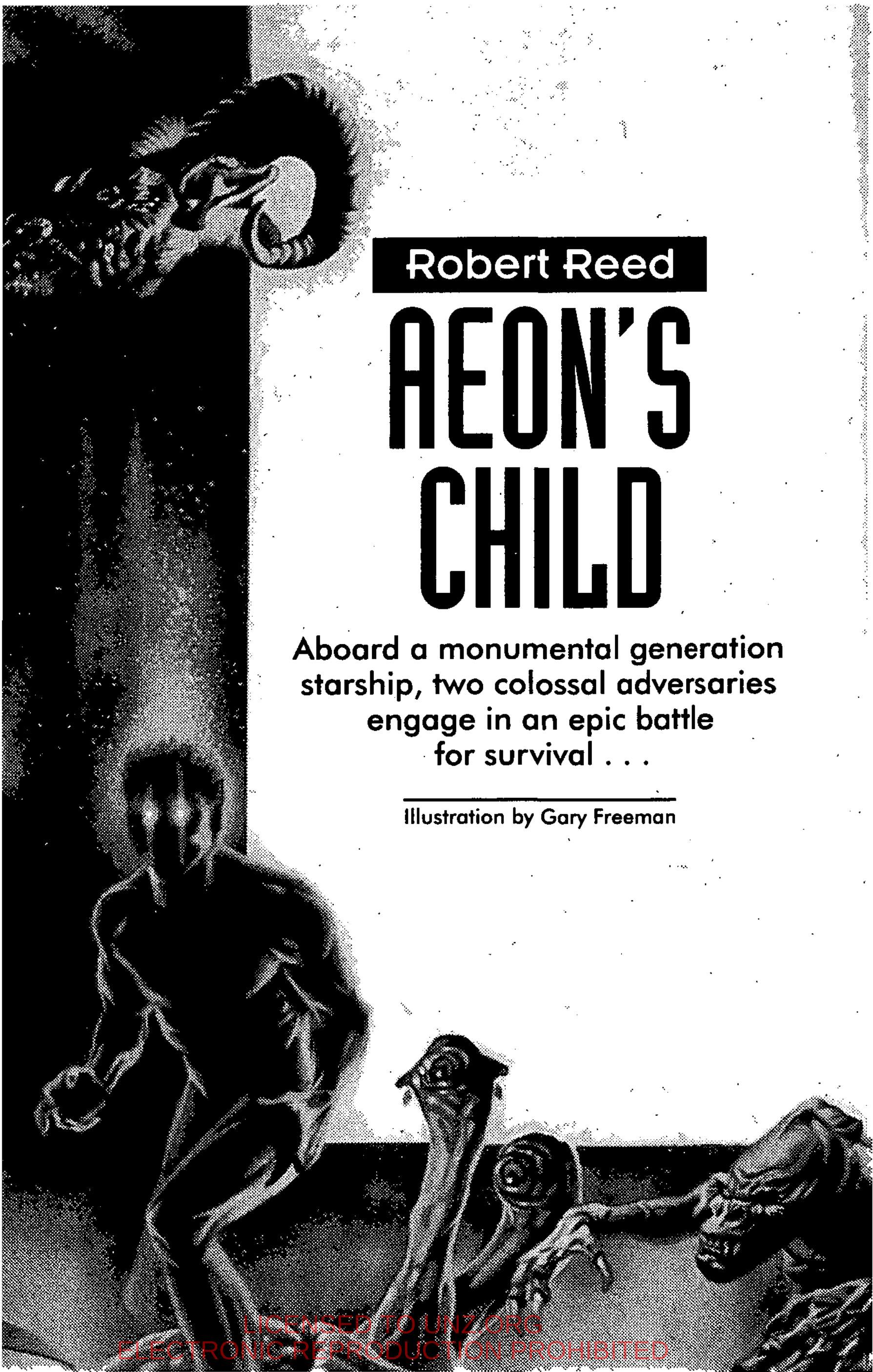


Illustration by Gary Freeman

Pamir was a captain of consequence. His ageless frame was tall and strong, partly because passengers seemed to expect both from the ship's officers. A large, pleasantly homely face conveyed confidence and a burdensome wisdom. In uniform, he drew long looks, whether from humans or sighted aliens. And unlike most captains, he had risen in the ship's hierarchy without depending on friendships or flattery. It was said—in his presence, with all the best intentions—that Pamir could have become a Submaster by now, earning a seat at the Master Captain's table. If he would only attempt the game. . . .

"Give gifts," Washen advised. "Memorable gifts, and durable. Gifts that will say, 'Pamir,' for ten thousand years."

He knew the game but feigned ignorance. "What would I give that could impress a Submaster?"

"There's that alien weed you like to grow. The one that sings."

"The llano-vibra?"

"Is that its name?"

He nodded, removing his mirrored captain's cap, then setting it on one of the obsidian busts fixed to the table's corners. "You think I should be giving away weeds."

"Pretty ones," she said. "Why not? Offer a reason."

With genuine disgust, he admitted, "If I did what you want, it would feel so calculated—"

"Then again," Washen interrupted, "maybe you don't deserve a promotion." She was tall and strong—a captain of roughly equal rank—and she was pretty in a smooth, unconscious way. They were lovers once, but that was so long ago that neither could remember any details. Friend to friend, she argued, "A captain has to believe in calculations. How else can he do his job? Formulas for acceleration, for stress loads. For ass-kissing. If you won't respect the formulas, maybe you don't belong at the Master Captain's table."

"I agree with you." Their drinks rose from the table's center. Claiming his rain-of-tears, Pamir said, "I don't deserve anything, and can we move to other business?"

"Such as?"

"I don't know. *You* wanted to see *me*, as I recall."

"And I can't stay long," she complained. "I'm greeting a shuttle full of Y'uy'uy. Have you heard about them?" No, he hadn't. "A social species, and tiny. A couple million are coming, and if I don't wiggle my fingers at each of them, in the proper way, the whole damned nest is my enemy."

As if practicing, Washen curled and uncurled one finger.

Pamir looked across the lounge, through its long transparent wall. A red-as-blood lake sloshed against the rocks below. Some kind of alien plankton colored the water. Probably poisonous to Terran life, the plankton was feeding—directly or indirectly—some of their remarkable passengers.

"But hey, speaking of newcomers. . . !"

Pamir turned. Puzzled, alert.

"I found one for you. And he fit most of your parameters." With a large, overly dramatic motion, she handed him a memo chip. "The odd bioscan. A very odd ship. And a port of origin that practically smells phony."

The chip was a giant snowflake worn simple by countless hands, its whiteness magnified by the tired black stone of the tabletop.

"An odd ship," she repeated. "Wooden, but not like any wood I know. He sold it for scrap. I've got the recyke reports. How many times have you seen a starship built from lumber?"

Pamir reached across the table, making a fist. "Who is *he?*"

"Don't you know? You told me to watch for him."

"*How long has he been here?*"

"You should see yourself," Washen exclaimed. Then she laughed, shaking her drink and inhaling the gases that rose out of solution. "I don't think I've ever seen quite that face on you."

"When did this passenger come aboard?"

She tapped the memo chip, as if answers would spring forth. "More than a week ago. But I was busy, and you were off-duty, and you never told me why I should sound an alarm."

Pamir wrestled with his adrenaline, feigning self-control.

"Wood," she repeated. "Tough, weird wood. Cellulose laced with nonterran proteins configured for strength and durability. Except it doesn't give much protection from radiation, or from impacts, and I'm surprised how fit the passenger seemed—"

"An organic ship," Pamir muttered.

"In places, yes." She sniffed her drink again, enjoying the temporary corrosion of her nervous system. "The engines had metals where you need them. And ceramics. And the guts were diamond. But there wasn't anything like hyperfiber, and the scrap value was nil—"

"A starfaring tree," Pamir offered. He consumed the rest of his drink, barely tasting the salt, wishing all the while that this was just some enormous, curious coincidence.

"I did some research for you." Again she tapped the chip. "There's a report of another ship like this one. Organic and sloppy. But it didn't stay with us. As it happens."

"Thank you," said Pamir, feeling ill.

"A sketchy, misfiled report." Washen was staring at a point behind his eyes. "I don't even know who wrote it."

Pamir lifted his cap with both hands, placing it on his head, at an angle calculated to give their passengers confidence in him. At least the human passengers. Again, he said, "Thank you."

"The man calls himself Samara."

He barely heard her voice.

"Human, but not. From a colony world that exists, only we didn't pass within a thousand light-years of it."

What should he do first? It had been centuries since Pamir had considered this scenario, and he felt lost, cold and ill, fears building between those gaping weaknesses.

"Samara immigrated without incident. You have his address."

Washen was a friend, and she was doing him a great favor. Yet he was so consumed by his troubles that when he looked at her he felt anger—a scorching, blistering, unfair rage. How could such a creature get onboard? he wanted to scream. But instead of speaking, he began to tug on his violet-black epaulets, thick fingers struggling to remain gentle.

"Some advice?" said Washen. "Come to the Master Captain's dinner this year. Bring your singing weeds, call them calculations, and smile until your face hurts." She showed him a gracious smile and a flirtatious wink, both framed by her mirrored uniform and cap. "Sit beside me, if you'd like."

Pamir sighed.

All he could think of saying was, "I don't raise llano-vibra anymore."

"No?"

"Not in ages," he muttered, claiming the memo chip and again looking through the transparent wall, gazing at that strange red lake and trying not to think of death.

The ship was *the ship*, no other name required for its millions of passengers and crew. Built by a vanished species, it was the rock-and-metal core of a giant world, its interior laced with tunnels, sunken seas, fuel tanks larger than some worlds and apartments without number. Humans had found and salvaged the ancient ship; it was being guided through its first circuit of the Milky Way, every paying passenger welcome. Why travel inside tiny, fragile ships? Why not remain safe inside the grandest and oldest vessel of its kind—a place for every biology, earth life and alien wonders thriving in peaceful partnerships? That's how the captains advertised their ship, beaming broad-spectrum images of Paradise along their future course.

But the truth was a much less tidy beast.

There were poverty wards famous for crime and madness. Samara had taken an apartment in the most notorious ward, Pamir learned—from the memo chip and from his own research. Yet the newcomer was a relatively wealthy passenger. The ship's economy was designed to be adaptable, and Samara had come prepared, offering more than just an old wooden starship to consumers. He had vials of giant molecules, intricate and irreproducible, considered art by several species. He also brought the mummified feet of another alien, collected on the home world and sold to grieving, grateful relatives. Plus Samara was the reputed author of a billion-word novel meant for the computer intelligences, already purchased by an onboard publisher and released to lukewarm reviews.

Whatever Samara was, he was distinctive.

A registered human; and while his bioscans were odd, nothing about them or the man seemed certifiably dangerous.

A minor captain had interviewed him; all would-be passengers enjoyed the same treatment. When he was shown his bioscan, Samara had nodded and smiled, tiny teeth flashing in a small, thin-lipped mouth. Then a voice more suitable for a bird said, "Yes, yes. A consequence of my home world. But those bodies are inert. Take all you want and watch them. Feed them. Torture them, if you wish. But nothing will happen because they aren't alive." The bodies were tiny organic features with a passing resemblance to mitochondria. "They're produced by native organisms. They get inside us, and there's no ridding of them. Unless you want me to endure a cell-by-cell scrubbing . . . if you think this grit might pose some kind of risk. . . ."

Samara was small and almost pretty, attempting charm but not quite succeeding. If Pamir had been the interviewer, knowing nothing, he would have pressed the man for more information. Why had he left his home world? What was his destination? There was ample reason to delay, pulling new tests from the bottomless bag that every captain possessed. *Just to be sure.* But that minor captain had avoided any ugliness, moving to short-term issues. "How will you live here?" he had asked.

"How will I pay my way, you mean." A songful laugh. A human hand swept through hair that seemed blond until it was touched, then for an instant, at certain angles, a bright golden-green. "I've done my research, and believe me, I plan to live cheaply. Without complaints."

Captains liked to hear promises of compliance.

"You've seen my ship," said Samara, showing a little grin. "To have come this far, and in such a vessel . . . doesn't that prove sincerity?"

It proved desperation, but the interviewer had seemed impressed with the logic, nodding and smiling in turn.

Pamir made a note to reprimand the officer, if he had the chance. Then he hunted through every shipboard record in his grasp, resurrecting the immigrant's last few days. A thousand-year passage was paid off. The cramped apartment was rented, then left empty. After a long search of security digitals—and several turf wars with security troops—Pamir pieced together portions of the man's days, including a talkative lunch with a familiar face.

"Perri," growled the captain, staring at the face.

Several hours later, he was in a wealthy district, at the front door of what passed for a modest local apartment. Long ago, Perri had been a member of the crew; but he quit for the life of a gigolo, fooling an ancient lady into marrying him. It was the wife who answered the door, and

Pamir thought of telling her about her husband's secret life. But he was too much the captain to act unseemly, watching her call for Perri then kiss him before retreating just out of sight.

Perri allowed him to walk no farther than the stone hallway beyond the opened door. "What do you want, friend?"

Pamir bristled with the word *friend*. He showed the gigolo a digital image, saying, "Samara."

"I know his name."

Pamir said, "You ate with him."

"I guess I remember that, too." Perri gave a little snort, amused by the scene. "And you want to know what we talked about, right?"

"I know what you said."

The gigolo waited, trying to gauge Pamir's mood.

"He learned that you travel, that you know the ship better than anyone else—"

"Except the captains."

"Right." Transcripts had been prepared by lip-reading computers. Parts of their conversation had evaded them, but the gist of it was easy to see. "Samara asked about secret places. Private wildernesses. Locations not on the public maps."

"So what?"

"What does he want?" asked the captain.

"He didn't name his goal."

"Can you guess?"

"In this case, no."

"Where does our sewage go?"

"Down," Perri replied, then laughed and shrugged his shoulders. "Right, he asked about sewage. And you know what I said."

"There's a treatment plant, and it's off-limits. Just a jumble of machinery, you told him." Pamir was breathing in ragged, wet gulps. "Big machines, old as the ship, scrubbing the water clean. And there's nothing at all to see."

Perri leaned against a polished stone wall, waiting.

"You told him there's nothing to see, then you claimed that you've never been there."

"Because I haven't been."

The captain took him by the throat, squeezing for emphasis. It was a gesture, nothing more. Humans rebuilt themselves long ago, making their bodies glancingly immortal. It took more horrific actions to cause harm. Yet a choking hand remained an effective crudeness, and so did a low angry threat. "Lie and I'll hurt you," said Pamir. "If I don't believe you, I'll ruin you. Promise."

"I didn't tell him. . . ." The gigolo spat at Pamir, then tried to slap the hand aside. "I told him nothing. . . !"

"Because you knew I was watching."

Perri tried an ineffective kick, then shrank down and moaned.

"You met with him later," said Pamir. "In secret. That's when you told Samara about what you saw—"

"I saw nothing," Perri complained.

Bones cracked inside the squirming neck.

"We didn't meet. I saw him once." Again Perri struck the hand, doing nothing. Then the hand withdrew, at its own pace. Perri swallowed, coughed. Then, "I said I wouldn't tell, and I didn't, and I don't even know what to tell. I barely saw the place—"

"Samara offered to pay you. Handsomely."

Perri glared at him, a lucid fury behind the eyes. "Even if I knew what to say, I wouldn't tell him. And did you notice? I paid for my own damn lunch!" Perri massaged his bruised neck. "I don't like Samara. I like him even less than I like you."

Pamir was genuinely surprised. "Oh, and why not?"

The gigolo had no easy response. "There's something wrong with him. Wrong." He coughed again, then fought to swallow. "He's deep water, I think. Whatever he is, he's mostly hidden. I think."

Pamir's surprise had doubled. He believed the man, despite all odds, and he felt an astonishing pleasure in the fact that two people didn't approve of this new immigrant.

"Darling?" said a woman's voice.

The hapless wife was emerging from the shadows, walking with a deliberative gait, looking at Pamir while she asked her husband:

"Are you all right, sweetness?"

Another cough, and Perri said, "Fine. I'm fine."

She stopped just short of them, her face set. "Sir, I think you should leave now." With a chilled voice, she said, "Captain or not, I want you out of my home."

As if Pamir was the villain here.

Each district had its captains' ward, usually just beneath the hull, always within one of the catacombs thought to be as ancient as the ship. Pamir, obeying tradition, kept an apartment in his own district. Relatively small, set away from the main tube line and difficult to find, it was a private realm with several hundred meters of tunnels, rooms of a hectare or two, and a whirlpool pond with colorful muscular fish in the spinning water, beds of blackpot mussels fixed to the bottom, preventing erosion for the last ten thousand years.

Before the mussels, Pamir had used freshwater corals.

Before corals, he had let the water gnaw at its basin, sculpting the greenish olivine however it wished.

The rare visitor, staring at the unkempt surroundings, liked to mention that cleaning your home wasn't a crime. After all, nobody knew if the ship's builders had lived in the catacombs. And even if these were homes, wouldn't *they* want the current tenants to keep them presentable?

But Pamir enjoyed the slumping, oxidized walls, thank you. He loved the sense of titanic age, the possibilities of history. In the early centuries, he had spent every off-duty moment in his largest room, staring at a wall covered with crosshatched scratches, trying to decipher meanings that might not exist. It was another delicious, unanswerable mystery in a ship with more mysteries than inhabitants. In that same room, later, Pamir began culturing the delicate llano-vibra plants, mastering their byzantine genetics to create songs of fragile, surreal beauty. But then he drifted away from the hobby, and the plants went wild, crossbreeding at will and losing all sense of pitch and rhythm.

A harsh, incoherent wail rose when Pamir entered the room. He barely noticed, halfway running through the tangled growth, bending to touch a certain knob of rock.

The floor beside him neatly dropped out of sight.

The tube car didn't officially exist, and it used energy stolen from nonessential machinery. The hatch sealed with a hiss. As Pamir sat down, the car began to accelerate, taking him through a network of tunnels, never repeating any past course.

Sensors watched for any fool trying to follow him.

Nobody ever did.

But he imagined Samara hunched over an identical panel, watching him with a cool, amoral malevolence. The image made him anxious when he was awake, then kicked its way into his dreams while he slept; and only in the last thousand kilometer fall could Pamir genuinely rest, shaken awake with the berthing.

Pamir undressed, his uniform left hanging in the car. Then he stepped through a second hidden doorway, a screaming mist, gray and toxic, greeting him on the other side. Hands to his mouth, he pushed into the mist, eyes tearing and sinuses catching fire, his naked feet splashing through caustic puddles and over a slope of badly eroded, diamond-sharp hyperfibers—a last line of defense to dissuade the curious and the feeble.

A thousand sewers fed into the district's vast purification center. Spent water, industrial wastes and the byproducts of alien biologies came roaring from orifices on all sides. The nearest sewer flowed from human places, and it was a genuine river, swift and rancid, beaten white by the ceaseless turbulence.

Years ago, Perri had ridden with that filth, his body encased in a hyperfiber suit, both hidden inside a whale's rotting carcass. Fancying himself as an adventurer, he had evaded every security system and survived the maelstrom, expecting to find great machines at work—powerful filters and distillers and atom-cracking wonders older than vertebrates, and more durable.

But instead, to his amazement, he found the Child, and with it one naked and enraged captain.

Pamir breathed between his fingers, feeling his throat swell and bleed. There was a thin and wobbly trail that he could feel more than see, and he avoided it, preferring the thin carpet of mock-fungi, gray and bristly, fed by the toxins. The sewer's roar was vast, uncomplicated. Other fluids moved in closer places, the air itself reverberating with thunderous swallowing sounds. Eventually the mists thinned, then vanished, leaving him on the shelf where he always stopped. He lowered his burned hands. His tough genetics began to heal the flesh. Eyes blinked and teared for a few moments, reclaiming their superior vision. And he lifted his gaze, turning in a slow circle, absorbing his surroundings.

The ceiling was an inverted bowl, a peach-colored sun strung from the apex, both sun and ceiling obscured by banks of water-fat clouds. The floor was like a shattered plate—a fifty thousand square kilometer plate—its shards loosely reassembled, every gap a canyon where a different sewer flowed. In the center was an ocean of sand—countless grains of scrap hyperfiber and catalytic metals—and on top of the sand was a shallow lake being perpetually drained, its overflow bound for reservoirs that would slake the thirsts of millions.

The old machines and every surface was built of hyperfiber, yet little of the wonderstuff was visible.

Life covered every surface.

Dense and vibrant.

Noisy.

Tireless.

Kilometer-long mock-vines. Mock-trees taller than starships. Mock-fungi of elegant shapes and vivid fluorescent colors. And all were linked, roots and fleshy tendrils locked together, a perfect biological embrace extending into the sewers, absorbing tainted water and lifting it, xylem pulling it through filtering gills and kidneys and more gills. Everything of use was harvested. Everything else—the filth of modern technology—was destroyed, if not on the first try then on the next, or the thousandth. However long the work took, it took; the Child was nothing if not tenacious, doing its job without complaint or failure.

As was the custom, Pamir whispered, "Hello."

The reply was diffuse and immediate, millions of mouths and other orifices exhaling as one, mangling the words, "Hello," and "Captain," and "Friend Pamir."

The ground shook under the Child's voice.

Pamir moved, head down, stepping wherever the vegetation looked soft and sturdy. His footprints didn't linger. Every trace of him was erased. Bacteria and viral bodies, skin flakes and dislodged hairs were caught and digested. Everything but the captain himself became the Child, incorporated and annihilated, then refashioned to serve some critical task.

Several times each year, during his off-duty time, Pamir visited the Child.

Their relationship was centuries old.

Yet even now he had to remind himself that here was one inhabitant, one organism—a multitude of forms, but all linked, like the cells inside his own durable body.

Only better.

Mock-animals appeared. Mock-insects. Mock-rodents. A herd of mock-okapi. Then a mock-angel arrived, shaped like a winged human female, gliding down to a meadow of mock-grass and its rectal umbilical linking with the grass, then the Child, the gesture as automatic as breathing.

Neural bodies spoke through the angel. A feminine voice observed, "You are early, friend. This time."

Pamir tried to speak, then stopped himself, unsure how to proceed.

Cloud-colored wings lashed at the air, causing the dew to leap from the gold-green blades—a clean chill rain in reverse—and with concern on its human face, the angel asked:

"What is wrong, friend Pamir?"

Fear, pure and raw, made him shiver and hold himself.

The Child tasted fear compounds boiling from him, and each body sobbed the same question with whatever passed for a mouth:

"What is wrong?"

Again, in a thunderblast.

"*What is wrong?*"

Pamir cupped his hands to his dampened face, legs buckling, knees driving into a mat of sweet-scented mushrooms. Beneath them was a solvent, gray and alien, suddenly exposed to the air. The rank odor made him cough, tasting blood again. He wished he could fall unconscious, but he didn't, and he had no choice but to say, "The Monster," with a quick, almost soundless voice. "The Monster's here, and I'm sorry. Sorry."

But the Child had guessed as much; what else could be so awful?

The mock-okapi came forward, placid herbivorous faces dropping, big blue tongues lapping at the solvent as the eyes gazed through him; and the angel spoke, a small pitiful voice begging, "Will you help me?"

Spores exploded into the air, tasting of cinnamon and things unnamed.

"Please, friend Pamir, will you help me?"

Even before he said, *Of course,* he was wondering why the Child would have to ask. After everything Pamir had risked for it—happily risked, without hesitation—why did he still have to prove his devotion, and with something as thin as words?

A minor captain had handled the initial interview, tabulating each discrepancy. Then showing his absence of spirit, he made no decision, leaving the immigrant waiting in the quarantine cell while he went to his superior. And that second captain came to Pamir, asking what she should do. Both captains were bureaucrats, trained by millennia of ritual to avoid initiatives; and in another thousand years, remembering the incident through foggy time, Pamir recalled giving them a prolonged dressing-down. Why, why, why should he be brought something as minuscule as one inappropriate passenger? Kick the idiot overboard, he had said. Then, just to prove his fortitude, he amended himself, saying, "No, I'll do the kicking. Watch your monitors, and learn."

The immigrant had a fictional name and a ludicrous biography. Smaller than any adult human, he had a glancing resemblance to a child, his features emphasizing the huge green eyes and a young boy's oversized head. Yet he claimed to be an adult, both in words and under bioscans. His starship—wooden-hulled, crude and probably unsafe for any further travel—was something he had built by himself. On a tiny, little-known colony world, he claimed. From an area without humans, the captain knew, and he pressed the man-child on that subject, making him admit that the home was a lie, that his identity was fabricated, and his bioscan was exactly what it seemed to be: A collection of odd, even bizarre features scattered within a glancingly human shell.

The boyish body was camouflage.

"You're an alien," said Pamir. "Admit it. There's no harm. We like aliens. We don't even know how many kinds are riding with us." A lie. Each species was registered, regardless of intelligence. "Maybe you're a criminal on your home world. Such things happen. There's no shame. We're a human venture, and the crimes of your world might not make us blink. How do you know? Until you admit the truth, you can't."

"I'm not a criminal," the Child maintained, eyes watering in a shamelessly human gesture. Calculated just as the boyish face was calculated, Pamir guessed. For pity's sake, and useless. "I have never done an intentional wrong."

"Not a criminal, but a saint. Huh!" Pamir laughed, giving his victim a pitiless gaze. "We can use saints. All we can find. But you see, the rules require me to ask: Saint or not, how do you intend to pay for your passage?"

The Child's eyes closed, opened. The mouth opened, words dribbling from it. "You can have my ship—"

"Your ship is trash," the captain barked. "How it's held together this long, I don't know."

Now the green eyes were dry, but infinitely fragile.

Pamir shook his head, and he laughed. Laughter was a weapon, and he attacked with it, battering the victim before he asked another good question. "How did you learn so much about us?"

"I monitored your broadcasts," replied the Child.

"And you're alien. Just say *yes*."

"Yes."

"See? And here you sit, still safe and whole."

The Child dipped its head, soft golden hairs breaking the light into tiny rainbows.

"What sort of beast are you?" Pamir pointed a thick finger at his victim, then lied. "Give details, and you won't be punished. Just make certain they're honest details."

"I like humans."

"Which is always good to hear, and it means little." He glanced at a hidden camera, showing the two captains his professional glee. "You've gone to the trouble of manufacturing a human-like carriage. Like me or not, the intent is to mislead me, and misleading me, sad to say, is a significant and punishable offense."

"I will do no harm," it claimed, trying tears again.

"*What* are you?"

"A refugee."

Watching the tears, Pamir wondered if they were just a little genuine. "Son," he said, "let me show you real honesty in action. We see a lot of very nice refugees, but we're a commercial vessel on a pleasure cruise, every last passenger required to pay his way. In goods. In services. In any of several abstract monetary systems."

The Child gave a studious nod, then began to stand.

"What are you doing?" Pamir barked.

"I don't know," whispered the defeated voice.

"You saw our broadcasts. Weren't you suitably warned?"

No response.

Pamir drew up a series of commands, starting the eviction procedure. Then, almost as an afterthought, he asked, "Are you certain you don't have some useful skill?"

"I have many skills."

"Fine. Name one."

The Child took several steps, finding a direction. When Pamir told it to stay there, to keep in sight, it responded by asking, "May I retrieve something from my ship?"

"But I'll be watching you," he warned. "Remember!"

Another lie. Pamir concentrated on the eviction, making sure every legal need was fulfilled. He didn't notice the Child's return, his eyes lifting with the sound of a weak breath, finding a vial of black water nestled in the boyish hands. "Can you scan this, please?" Easily, in an instant. The results showed a stew of aggressive toxins and carnivorous oxides that could have poisoned Pamir. Just the touch of them, absorbed through the skin, would have devastated his big strong ageless body; and his first thought, reading the scan, was that this foolish organism was going to threaten him. "Let me stay or I'll attack you. . . !" Something to that effect.

But there was no threat, verbal or otherwise. The Child simply lifted the vial to its mouth and drank it dry, then with ungulate teeth grown in the last few minutes, it chewed the glass to slivers and swallowed them, too.

"Huh!" Pamir exclaimed.

He tried to laugh again, saying, "Okay, you're a tough little thing. You're put together differently than me. So what?" He paused, then said, "It doesn't matter. On my authority, I'm evicting you from this vessel. Good luck to you. And good-bye—"

"I'll clean this water," the Child promised. Begged. "If you can wait for a moment—"

"Toward what end?" Pamir interrupted. "Frankly, it's not that novel. Not for shipboard entertainment. This voyage will take several hundred millennia, and you'll have to do better. Sorry."

The Child approached, its breath scalding.

"Before," it whispered, "I drank *your* water."

So what?

"After I spoke to the first captain, I tasted what you drink." A pinching of features; a visible pain. "Sour water."

Pamir said nothing, waiting.

"Your recycling systems are ill, I think."

That was a class-one secret. This district's purification system was having trouble coping with the pollutants of so many species. But the contamination, despite being real, was at such a low level that no organism, or even a bioscan, would be able to discern—

"I can help you."

—any problem. Quelling his emotions, Pamir built a weak smile, then swallowed and mentioned, "There is the obvious, my friend. Perhaps you can clean up the occasional liter, but multiply that by millions more, and every minute, and without time for a breath, even. . . ."

The Child had hoped to be accepted as human, or at least as an ordinary alien. Both prospects finished, it had no choice but honesty. It didn't trust Pamir—how could it trust an organism so unlike itself?—but it was out of choices, save death.

In a quiet, stolid way, it said, "I have more than this mouth."

"Is that so?"

"I can be large," it promised.

Pamir didn't respond, gathering his belongings, ready to leave.

"Once," said the Child, "I was vast."

"As big as me?"

The child realized it was being mocked, and either out of anger or fear, it grabbed Pamir under the arms and lifted him from the ground, without effort. Then with its stinking, blistering breath, it told him, "I was once as large as a world."

"Pardon me?"

"You have a word . . . if you knew me you would describe me as. . . ." A pause. "As being . . ." The face was changing gaining color and a rocky stillness, the eyes shrinking to hot white points. "As being gaian. I am, that."

The captain kicked at the air, muttering, "What? What?"

Not believing the words, but unable to discount them, either.

"What are you?" he asked, believing that if he could hear the word again, he could dismiss this creature, perhaps with one of his reliable laughs—

—and the Child said, "Small. I am."

Weeping with its changing face.

"I have become small, and weak, and I beg you, wondrous sir, will you allow me to stay here with you?"

The Monster had arrived, and after delivering the news, Pamir remained with the Child for several days and nights. They discussed plans of action, modes of defense, and the Child began to alter its nature, still cleaning the incoming waters but pulling more and more of its flesh into fighting bodies unlike any the captain had ever seen. Mock-okapi went extinct. Mock-rodents grew poisoned fangs and spurs. And the mock-angels gave birth to griffin-like creatures, hot-blooded and enormous, gills sucking in air like ramjets as they learned to fly, great roaring flocks of them patrolling just beneath the clouds.

Somehow all that activity comforted Pamir. The Monster was close, but it hadn't yet found the Child. And even if it did, he couldn't believe that such a tiny organism would prevail here. He said as much to his companion, and the Child responded with silence. The entire cavern paused, save the rushing waters. What was it thinking? Then a few griffin voices said, "Perhaps you are right, friend Pamir," and why did it feel as if he had disappointed the creature? Since when was confidence a symptom of failure?

He boarded the tube car, starting for home.

Thinking of that long-ago interview, Pamir began to doubt himself. A more ambitious captain would have seized the opportunity, dragging the Child before a Submaster, or perhaps the Master Captain herself. The gaian would have been given official asylum, responsibilities passed along the links of command; and today, the Monster would be facing the official resolve and pooled resources of the united ship.

But then doubt shifted back on itself. What if Pamir's superiors hadn't understood the situation? They might have evicted the Child out of fear or sheer ignorance. Or what if comprehension hadn't brought resolve? Even if the Child was given asylum, he thought, security measures would have been weak at best. Captains talk. They will tell passengers any astonishing thing, just to impress. And with passengers coming and going all the time, before too long this entire arm of the galaxy would have known about the Child, and wouldn't the Monster have come regardless?

No, he'd made the only good choice. Pamir had to handle these things himself. That's why he had faked the Child's eviction. With the two other captains watching, he had said, "Gaian, my ass! I can't believe such a thing!" And to make his lie seem more real, he had launched the wooden starship toward the nearest habitable world, its propulsion system sabotaged but without reason, the engine failing on its own. A few decades later, there was a flash of light against the stars, and the ship was gone, and Pamir comforted his subordinates by telling them that rules had reasons, and besides, it was his blame to wear. Not theirs.

By then, the Child was safe and comfortable in its secret home.

Using his authority and subterfuge, Pamir had wrested control of the sewers away from another captain—with that captain's secret blessing—and nobody asked why or thought to complain. Gradually, as the Child grew larger and more competent, Pamir could put the ancient machines to sleep. Insoluable problems were solved. Effluents were absorbed and simplified, and water pure to the billion-trillion levels ran from everyone's tap. And for a thousand years, with lies and the occasional bribe, Pamir was able to deflect every official who showed the least little curiosity in trash.

The Child became his friend, and more.

Intelligent. Awesome. Beautiful beyond measure. And that from an ancient human who had grown tired of stars and nebulae, human lovers and his chosen profession.

The Child was a miracle, and it looked upon the captain as its savior. When Pamir made a visit, it welcomed him by voice and with a thousand charities. It invented fruits and meaty pods, no two tasting alike. Mock-lovers took every lubricious form. Visual spectacles, in light and in fire, made Pamir forget to breathe. A trillion mouths, singing in unison, made his scraggly llano-vibra seem pathetic. From its plastic self, the Child grew astonishing bodies—sauropods that made the hyperfiber shake; dragons that spit narcotic clouds of perfume; butterflies with hectare-sized wings; and once, a living giant exactly like Pamir, complete with his face and the mirrored uniform and the perfectly tipped cap. And always, always there were multitudes of smaller butterflies and bizarre flowers and other mock-species evolved in a night and extinct before the next day's end.

Captains asked him, "What do you do with your free time? We don't see you anymore."

It didn't occur to Pamir that they missed his company. They were just nosy people, and he forgave them, shrugging his shoulders and saying, "I do a little traveling, alone. Or I stay home. Whatever suits my mood, I guess."

"That's funny," a few captains remarked. "We thought you had a new lover somewhere."

With a sly look, Washen had told him, "I thought you were ashamed of her."

Ashamed? Never. And he wouldn't use the word "lover," except perhaps in the most abstract, ethereal sense.

But leaving the Child so soon was like parting from a lover. Pamir missed its company after he was underway, and for every conscious instant after that. And because the Child disliked his confidence, he stopped feeling it, feeding a nugget of gloom until there was nothing else, a part of him terrified that the Monster—this Samara creature—would attack now, in his absence, robbing Pamir of his chance to die with his perfect friend.

Home again, slipping through the hidden entrance, Pamir's first thought was to contact the Child by one of several secure means. Just to know it was safe. But that was a risk in itself, and instead, with a dose of practiced discipline, he made himself sort through various messages, most of them from captains and each message more mundane than the last.

Then came a familiar face, smiling, and a sexless recorded voice saying, "Hello, Pamir."

Pamir triggered the digital by muttering, "Hello?"

"When you have extricated yourself from the Child," said Samara, "come see me. We need to speak."

Why was he surprised?

He had no right to feel surprise, a glacial chill building.

"We can meet on neutral ground. You select the place." Samara paused, smiling again, and the background slid into focus. It was sitting in a captains' lounge, and behind it, sitting at a second table, was the captain who had first interviewed the Child. And Samara gave a little laugh, anticipating Pamir's reaction.

"I'll assure you of your safety," it said. "Honestly, I hold no malice toward you, sir."

Never in his enormous life had Pamir felt this alone.

This small and vulnerable.

A child-sized hand appeared, lifting a glass to thin, smiling lips. "How could you hope to hide anything so large, dear captain?" Samara asked, taking a sip of chilled water.

He couldn't hope to hide the Child, of course. Hope was a game, a makeshift shelter for ego and his pride. Captains told stories, spun gossip, and kept thorough records of every official act. And how could Pamir ever hope to keep the Child a perfect secret, belonging to no one but himself?

Full, unedited maps were only available to the captains—in principle—but Samara instantly claimed to know how to find their meeting place. The ship was mapped ages ago by robots, tiny and self-replicating; they had been set free in the tunnels, doubling their numbers with each branching, using sound and radiation to peer into the volumes of chilled metal and stone around them. One robot had walked into Pamir's selected chamber, but it didn't find another exit, then turned and retreated. No human hand had ever touched that space, which was its attraction. Anything organic, down to the smallest, most desiccated spore, had to be linked to the captain, or more likely, to Samara.

As clean as medicine and persistence could make him, Pamir arrived early for their meeting. Robot tracks showed the way, nothing else marring a thin coating of gray-white dust. No contamination, claimed his bioscanner. He brightened his torch's beam. And of all things, he remembered the first time he had stepped into his apartment, four billion years of peaceful darkness broken and a weak, self-important part of himself grieving because of it.

There was a sound.

From *out there?*

"Welcome," said a voice. Familiar, and not. Neither warm nor cold. Then came a diffuse orange light that silhouetted a human figure, both of them tiny, apparently distant.

Pamir took another bioscan, unable to find the tiniest hint of anything that didn't belong to him.

The chamber was a cube, precisely fashioned and intended for no known purpose. A little more than a kilometer on a side, it seemed both vast and relentlessly claustrophobic; Pamir had to concentrate to make his legs walk, the sound of his boots crisp and steady, each footfall swallowed by the darkness.

"Welcome," said the voice once more. Louder, nearer.

Pamir hesitated, took a ragged breath, then asked:

"What do you want?"

"I want," said the Monster, "what you expect me to want. I intend to kill your friend."

There. At least it's said. . . .

Again he was walking, halfway across the square floor, then farther, still nothing organic but his own assemblage of microbes and wayward cells; yet there was a vivid glowing mass of *something,* presumably alive, and Pamir could only guess where his opponent had gotten the materials and the energy to construct it.

No, *construct* was the wrong word.

He straightened his cap, extinguished the torch, then stepped at a faster clip. Everything was Samara, he reminded himself; everything was an extension of the hidden genetics, the mammoth potentials. And still, the damned bioscanner refused to show any trace of it.

"You're kind to see me," said Samara. Its body was the same, except nude and blatantly sexless, empty hands offered and the face seemingly amused when Pamir stopped short, refusing to touch it. "I promised not to hurt you. I meant my words."

"Leave us alone," Pamir managed, his voice soft. Almost silent.

"You do call it the Child, don't you?"

"How do you know—?"

"I understand its preferences. I did come here with a certain amount of knowledge, after all." A pause. "But answer this: Whose child is it?"

Pamir watched the body step closer, no threat implied. Between the body and the glowing orange mass was a tendril, neural impulses flowing both directions, the Samara body no more than a finger to the whole.

"In all these years," asked Samara, "haven't you ever asked about its mysterious parent?"

"Aeon," Pamir replied, in reflex.

Samara repeated the name, nodding. "What else do you know? Please, tell me."

"Everything."

" 'Everything.' " It acted jovial for a long moment, then said, "You are a captain and a very good one, as I understand it. But can you tell me, in perfect honesty, that you know 'everything' about this great vessel of yours? Of course you cannot. And you can't claim perfect knowledge about the Child, either."

"You murdered Aeon," Pamir snapped. He was panting, feeling a general weakness. For an instant, he hoped Samara would murder him here, drawing the wrath of the captains. "The Child's told me the story. Everything or not, I know where you're from. I know you. And you murdered its parent."

"Well," said the body, "in those terms, yes. I'm guilty."

Pamir took a half-step forward. If he died, various computers would release files to certain trusted captains; even if they wouldn't defend the Child, at least they would have vengeance on a captain's killer.

"For my entertainment," said Samara, "and for my edification, slice off a piece of this 'everything.' Simplify. Clarify. And perhaps we can reach an accommodation." What might or might not be teeth shone inside the narrow mouth. "And if you can, hurry. It's been a long chase. I'm eager to get to the end, please."

Pamir had heard the epic dozens of times, in a wondrous array of voices. The original Child told it, then a variety of other bodies. Singly, or together. The story appeared as written words in living wood. As lucid dreams brought on by tailored drugs. A trillion torchflies made a cold living picture, majestic and tragic, their spent bodies falling like rain over Pamir. But his preferred style was a single voice, usually an angel's, her wings embracing him along with her arms and the whispered words making him tremble, with astonishment and awe, and rage, and something indistinguishable from love.

Aeon had been a gaian in the truest, rarest sense:

A vast, interlocking organism carpeting a rich world, the simplest algae and the most sophisticated mock-animals linked together in a glorious Whole.

It existed because of evolutionary accidents. A steady climate, a devoted sun, and runaway symbioses had given it birth. Neural centers arose from a gently parasitic worm; it was the worm's spores that the bioscans had found, each spore filled with the makings of an intellect. Only one world in ten thousand ever showed gaian qualities. Fewer than one in ten million generated any kind of consciousness. And according to Pamir's research, none were truly self-aware, possessing what seemed to him to be an authentic and priceless soul.

But Aeon wasn't born alone. There was a sister world, complete with an atmosphere and two small, salty oceans; the two worlds were in a tidal lock, the same faces staring at each other as they turned—sixteen hours to the day—around their center of gravity. With countless eyes, night and day, Aeon watched its companion, marking the changing of its seasons, the advance and retreat of glaciers, and the eras of relative abundance when the land and swollen waters became a golden sweet green.

The moon was alive, Aeon realized. And knowing nothing else, it assumed a gaian entity.

For millennia, by many means, Aeon attempted to speak to its great neighbor. It grew forests and huge swarms of torchflies: it caused its ocean's plankton to fluoresce. Every display built symbols. Pictures of their two worlds. Abstract patterns meant to imply simple mathematics. Images of favorite bodies, favorite shores, jungles and mountains and deep cold waters. But there was no response—nothing clear and unambiguous—and Aeon was forced into more desperate means.

Winged mock-animals could fly only so high. And living balloons might reach the ends of the atmosphere, but then their gases escaped, their bodies freezing and descending again like spent leaves to the forest floor.

New ideas were needed, plainly.

Specialized, oversized neural centers were produced, generating silly notions with a smidgen of genius in the mix. That's where the idea of rockets was created. Within days, the first wood-and-flesh bodies were born and launched. And found wanting. Yet that direction became the focus of hope: New materials; new fuels; radical new methods of growth. Specialized bodies mined the crust, purifying and reshaping elements scarcely needed in the past. The first metal-gutted rockets reached space, a few achieving orbit; and then, after a supreme marshaling of resources, better rockets landed on the moon's surface, their mock-animal crews examining and deciphering, then returning home to disgorge memories of immeasurable worth, immeasurable gloom.

That other world had a thin dry impoverished atmosphere. Its poles were brutally cold while the equator baked until the land was blowing dust. Life was divided into units—into bitter and independent species—and even within one species there was competition, each body struggling for water and food, homelands and mates.

There was nothing gaian to find, nothing there to relish.

In the most fundamental sense, Aeon was alone.

Yet it could feel its neighbor's pain, the waste and daily tragedies; and after careful consideration it saw no choice but to act.

It sent rockets by the thousands.

From the neighbor's own flesh, Aeon taught its pieces how to cooperate. How to share without shame or hesitation. To build neural masses and link them together, a collective intelligence born, and eventually, a genuine self. *A soul.*

Ages passed, productive beyond measure.

The gaians spoke, faces to faces. Aeon discovered radio waves, and later, lasers. In tandem, they fashioned a single network of mirrors and antennae, orbiting and landlocked, all watching the great emptiness engulfing tiny them.

Eventually they heard creatures speaking, star to star to star. They realized that the universe was rich with minds. And strange minds, at that. Minuscule. Swift. Cooperative, but not in the gaian sense. And minds without number, Aeon declared, enthralled with their roar and the occasional gifts of knowledge.

The neighbor suggested that they should build a genuine link.

A physical connection to make them One.

Aeon invented the means. Why not a great bridge? No wood or metal would be strong enough. But certain ultrapure crystals, if properly cultivated and aligned, could be laid down like coral, a great strong perfect bridge accreting with the ages.

Aeon's deepest water was directly beneath its neighbor's waist. To support its end of the bridge, it grew a small continent—a mammoth hunk of living wood and hollow aluminum—and the bridge appeared as an endless tree, then as many trees, and finally as a great tube bigger around than most mountains.

Matching tubes joined in space.

There was a ceremony.

A celebration.

A grand, glorious embrace.

Aeon allowed its fellow gaian to build huge muscular pumps, and with them it took a modest quantity of ocean water, spilling it over the bitter plains.

But no more, Aeon warned. In a cautioning tone.

They would share everything, naturally. But their long-range rockets were returning with news of water. The precious stuff was common on nearby worlds, and comets were made of nothing else; and wasn't it reasonable to wait, disrupting nothing until prosperity could be won?

But the neighbor had no intention of waiting.

Without warning—without so much as a declaration of intent—it stole the floating continent. Neural pipelines and mock-animals arrived, the latter built to be warriors. Bladders full of careful poisons broke open, killing Aeon's helpless flesh; and in that instant, in retreat, it named its opponent the Monster, every other name stricken from its mind.

There was a slow, enormous war.

The pumps roared, joined by still larger pumps. Cubic kilometers of seawater flowed across the bridge, flooding deserts and creating new seas, the Monster's visible face suddenly blue as a gemstone.

Aeon tried to fight, and failed.

What did it know about competition? How could it learn treachery and cruelty, and learn them fast enough?

Now it knew why peaceful, selfless gaians were scarce; and it wasted centuries dwelling on the unfairness of the universe, the grossness of life, intellect trying to contrive some noble gaian course.

Its ocean dropped, the pace accelerating, the continental shelves exposed and its once-verdant continents growing cold and dry. The floating continent—ancient now—rested several kilometers beneath its starting point. Sunken volcanoes stood as islands. Aeon's shores fell straight into deceptively tranquil seas. And with the new poverty came dust storms, rumbling glaciers, and brutal cold droughts without end.

The Monster prospered. Its smaller world was submerged, hidden beneath the stolen waters. Floating continents of mock-kelp fed on sunlight and fusion power. Aeon hoped it would take its fill, finally satiated, leaving the first gaian maimed but alive. And with that hope in mind, it called out for a meeting, sending diplomats across the front lines, a thousand mock-dragons escorting them to the near end of the cursed bridge.

A still newer pumping facility was beginning to work; the Monster showed it off, without shame.

The atmosphere was being absorbed, pressurized and liquified, then taken away. A great chill wind was blowing up the new shaft. One of the diplomats was thrown in for emphasis. How much air would be enough air? the survivors inquired. And the Monster responded with a great laugh, its nearest mouths admitting:

"I will leave nothing here but bare stone and hard vacuum."

A single diplomat asked, "But why?"

"What else would I do?" it responded, utterly amused. "We can't negotiate because I have won, and you will soon die, and why did you waste this flesh on such a ridiculous mission?"

The diplomats were killed, in a painful manner, their neural centers returned for Aeon's edification.

A few centuries later, the dying gaian managed to produce a single durable starship with its own pilot—the self-sufficient Child—and the Child fled the war, carrying a portion of its parent's memories and character, setting course for the strongest of the nearby transmissions.

Deciphering their meanings, the Child discovered the great ship.

It changed its shape and nature, fitting expectations as well as it could manage. What choice did it have but to believe the transmissions, expecting to find a tolerant and charitable crew, and a berth for its little self?

Mercy, in whatever truncated form, had to exist in the universe.

Otherwise, why live?

Decided the Child.

Why, without mercy, should one ever bother with the smallest single breath?

Samara listened to the tale, never interrupting.

It remained silent, and Pamir realized that this was the first time that he himself had ever told the story. In any form.

Then Samara showed a wan smile, saying, "A delicious lie."

Pamir mopped at the sweat on his homely face. "What do you mean? That it never happened?"

The body shrugged its shoulders, the orange glow behind it flaring, dilating orifices belching gases that caught fire. For emphasis, probably. Then it said, "In these last days, I've come to understand your species. Tiny minds, and old. Thoughts so hardened by habit and dream that none of you seem capable of asking the obvious—"

"I'm expelling you," Pamir blurted. "I'll go to the Master Captain, if that's what it takes."

"You can't expel what you can't catch, old man."

Again, Pamir hoped to be murdered. A heroic, short-sighted part of him saw no other solution.

The orange mass moved, retreating like some vast amoeba. There was a vivid sloshing as its watery self crept into hairline fissures, unmapped and uncountable. That's how it got here, the captain realized. Through the ship's cracked, aged body; and how could he evict such a creature?

Samara asked:

"Who is the Child?"

Pamir blinked, managing a breath but no answer.

"Is it that little fragment of Aeon—your dear friend—or maybe it's Aeon's world-sized creation?" The body stepped backward, pausing against the ancient wall before saying, "Perhaps both are its children. But since I arose from the first and truest child, perhaps I too should be given that name. Yes?"

"Stay away from me," Pamir whispered.

Samara responded with a strange prolonged gaze, eyes pained; then it asked another question:

"If brothers tell two stories—?"

Yes?

"—which brother will you believe?"

The body was merging with the basaltic wall. The orange glow was the weakest, coolest light imaginable.

"Which of us?" asked the vanishing mouth.

Pamir gave no answer.

"I intend to take relish in my work," Samara proclaimed. "A fair warning to you, and good-bye. Forever, I hope."

Then, darkness.

A four-billion-year night returned, undiminished by that sliver of day.

"Weapons," said Pamir, speaking as much to himself as the Child. "I know places. Sources. *You* can't make these kinds of weapons for yourself—"

"Thank you."

"—and I can use them, too. Another pair of hands? Does that sound worthwhile?"

"Friend Pamir," the Child replied, speaking through the nearest griffin. "When it's time, I hope you leave me. I can't ask you to fight, and frankly, if you don't mind my saying, you are tiny and weak and more a burden than my fellow soldier." The voice was certain, logic and concern smeared together. "What I've asked you to do, you have done. What more can I want?"

"Let me take my chances," Pamir responded. Then, for emphasis, he promised, "It'll take more than words to keep me away from you."

The Child didn't react to the banality, except to beat the griffin's wings. Huge eyes watched him, the golden pupils pulling wide, threatening to swallow Pamir whole.

He turned, walking away.

An alien sewer flowed beside him, rushing between high canyon walls. Here the water should be clean and sweet. But as more of the Child was readied to fight, less of the wastes were being absorbed and purified.

Eventually no work would be done, and raw sewage would fall through the central sands, into a reservoir that Pamir had left empty for this day. He had recalibrated the computer overseers; years could pass, and no one needed to know what was happening. Yet that act—the sabotage of a warning system—reminded Pamir that he wasn't acting as a captain, that his first duty was no longer to the ship and its smooth, dignified operation.

Fumes lifted from the river, tickling his nose. Scorching flesh. Pamir coughed but refused to back away from the shoreline. In the torrent, camouflaged to match the brown poisons, was a sort of mock-fish, suction cups holding it to the hyperfiber bottom and its armored back visible in the deeper troughs. A new species, he thought. Then he corrected himself: A*n old species, with fresh wrinkles.* The Child had mentioned it. Aeon built it during the long war. Eggs that mimicked the dead shells of plankton were carried by currents, occasionally pulled into the transworld bridge. These fish fed on moving water and simple organics, building flesh laced with unstable compounds. The dead gaian had tried to demolish the bridge with them, wanting to ignite the bodies in a single apocalyptic blast. But the Monster had anticipated the attack, no significant damage done; and afterward it had mocked Aeon for trying such a transparent, foolhardy and useless nontrick.

What good would a few fish do now? Pamir asked himself. And he coughed, tasting blood as he turned to look at the canyon walls and sky.

The Child was transforming itself; he kept forgetting where he was.

Every vegetable mass was covered with spines and piercing threads, a thousand proven, reborn poisons waiting to be injected, another thousand fresh poisons built from alien sewage, ready to be thrown into the breach. No mock-animal, no matter how small or scarce, lacked a killing function. Fruiting bodies were filled to bursting with napalms. Bacteria generated tons of necrotic enzymes. The griffins were growing larger, swifter—and more ominous—they were resting more than training, shepherding their energies in case of a sudden attack. Even the Child's color hinted at deadly work, a blackness of flesh swallowing the soft orange light, hiding details, a velvety sameness making an attacker's job just ever so slightly more difficult.

Pamir couldn't wander at will anymore. Even if a toxin didn't kill him, there would be damage to his skin, puncture wounds and the reflexive slashes of spring-loaded blades.

The Child was right; he was small, weak, and no doubt a burden.

Yet he had helped, undoubtedly. According to the Child, Samara had to enter through one of the orifices; the hyperfiber floor and ceiling were too dense and perfect to allow passage. That known, Pamir had ordered robots to hide sensors above and below this facility. And more robots had set boobytraps in the sewers, inorganic bombs and electrified screens set to fire if they felt anything alive. And Pamir himself had climbed inside the ancient machines, behind these very canyon walls, fiddling with worn parts and the power sources, inventing at least one good way to help the Child . . . if it came to that. . . .

"What kinds of weapons?" asked a voice.

A griffin—the same huge griffin—laid a dry talon over Pamir's shoulder, in a gentle fashion. Its talons and beak were sheathed in hyperfiber, mirror-colored and sharp. Pamir had ordered them from a friendly supplier, paying for them from an official account; another lapse as a captain, and he didn't care.

"And where will you find them, friend Pamir?"

He preferred to answer the first question, offering possibilities, then admitting, "But I can't be certain. I mean, I've never actually had reason to buy this kind of gear. . . ."

The Child waited, saying nothing.

"Captains," promised Pamir, "know all the illegal markets."

"Is there something else?"

He hesitated.

"That you've forgotten to tell me, perhaps."

Feigning confusion, he said, "I told you what's important. Why wouldn't I?"

The Child knew about his meeting with Samara. But Pamir had neglected to mention the parting words, hoping it would be forgotten. And since it was anything but, and since it must have showed on his troubled face, the Child felt justified to ask, "Is there something trivial? Something silly? Why not say it and get it done with, friend Pamir?"

Like a lover admitting to an indiscretion, he blurted out, "It tried to tell a different history."

"Yes?"

"Different," he repeated.

The talon lifted. A small voice said, "I can imagine."

"I don't know what's different. All it did was make noise about a two-sided story."

"The creature's clever," the Child replied. "Remember that."

"I remember." There was no place to hide his eyes, and a sheen of cold sweat made his skin shine. "It just gave me this vague shit about brothers. . . . I don't know why—"

"Because you can imagine *anything*. You have that *power*, it knows full well. . . !"

Pamir had worked hard for days, forcing himself to avoid any dreaminess, keeping his liquid thoughts in safe places.

Captains—every captain—knew doubt was a killer.

A decision made, then aborted, oftentimes was worse than the simple wrong decision.

"It is cunning," said the griffin, with confidence.

Pamir gave a nod. Then after a long uncomfortable pause, he added, "I'll keep one weapon for my own use. And I will be here—"

"If you wish."

"—when Samara comes."

"It's your choice, friend Pamir."

The griffin sprang into the air, wings beating once, then again, carrying it toward a high perch where the old hyperfiber lay exposed, griffins by the hundreds in a tidy mass, doing nothing.

Something soft touched Pamir's back, and he wheeled, surprised to find a reborn angel, perfect breasts swaying before his face and its face—a lean strong lovely favorite—saying, "For you," over and over again.

Hands stroked his chest, no human hands as soft.

Then the wings extended, causing the breasts to lift, and Pamir heard himself saying, "Not now, no." He couldn't accept the gift. Not here. "Take it back. Make something useful with it." Something wicked and brutal, and fatal. "But thank you, Child. Thanks."

The angel's eyes seemed deep, hiding worlds.

It stepped into the churning waters, flesh dissolving as it moved, without pain, the beautiful body embraced and annihilated in an instant; and Pamir was left in what passed for solitude.

He took an official leave of absence.

The Submaster thought he understood, taking Pamir's hand in a gesture of pure ignorance, remarking, "Enjoy your rest. But remember, endless rest is Heaven, and Heaven is for the dead."

A low-ranking crewmember sold Pamir five dozen portable lasers, homemade from stolen parts and capable of incinerating everything short of top-grade hyperfibers. As was customary, the captain told the seller that he was taking friends on a hunt, their quarry large, alien and nonsentient. That would be the crewmember's excuse, in case of trouble. Then Pamir set to work, adapting all the lasers but one for griffins' paws. He was working at home, trying to hurry, when Washen contacted him. Could they meet for drinks again? And talk?

"Talk about what?" Pamir was standing in an adjacent room, hoping to brush her aside now and for good. "I'm awfully busy, if you really want to know—"

"Your friend vanished."

"What?" He blurted the word, thinking of the Child. His first instinct was to panic, trying to piece together some story . . . the Child had decided not to fight, following their planned escape route . . . except then he realized Washen meant some other friend. . . .

"Samara," she said. "Remember him?"

Pamir exhaled through his teeth, remarking, "I don't know him."

"Either way, he's gone." Washen gave a little smile, as if some special knowledge was being shared. "And since you seemed interested in him—"

"Not him, no. I was mistaken."

She knew better but didn't press. "I heard a rumor that you're taking some time off."

"A little." No reason to lie now.

"Who's doing your jobs?"

He named captains, leaving one responsibility unaccounted for.

Washen didn't mention the obvious, a kind of tacit conspiracy begun. What did she suspect? Nothing could be as strange as the truth, he told himself; then his friend, peer, and ex-lover remarked:

"She must be astonishing."

"Who?"

"The woman. Whoever she is." A slicing look, jealousy balanced with a strange vapid pity. "But you don't even know, do you? How much you're in love. Do you even sense—?"

He blanked the screen, the channel.

In a mad rush, he loaded the tube car with the lasers. Then Pamir set out for the Child, taking the most direct route, thinking hard and finally deciding that of course he loved the entity, in a fashion, and why shouldn't he admit it? Yet once he arrived, stepping through the final hatch, he couldn't say the words. He found himself facing a griffin, its eagle-eyes staring through him; and after his moment's hesitation, in a hushed voice, the Child told him:

"Samara. Is here."

Holding to form, their enemy had arrived as Drought.

Every sewer was blocked. Plugs of rubbery flesh were lodged upstream, beyond the reach of boobytraps. The river below Pamir—the one from human places—had fallen to a greasy blue-green rivulet, its fish dead and dying, the Child absorbing and reallocating their bodies in the grandest kind of panic he had ever seen.

Griffins took every laser but his.

The first griffin remained behind, asking for a quick lesson.

Pamir showed how to link the laser's umbilical to the ship's power net, then he gave a demonstration, sealing the hatch with a thunderous blast. An instant later, an alarm sounded. *Something* had moved in the nearby tunnels; sensors disgorged great volumes of vague data. Pointing his laser at the dry river's source, the captain said, "It's massive. And it's setting off the boobytraps."

The orifice was unlit, no motions betrayed.

The laser's barrel began to twist, correcting for Pamir's nervous tremors.

"Hide," begged a hundred small voices. "Will you, please?"

He selected a small intake port, exposed now by the drought. The griffin carried him and his laser to it, and a second griffin brought a hyperfiber suit, trim and lightweight, with a double-thick helmet and a sealed environment. Looking at his reflection in the port's hyperfiber wall, he decided that he felt as expected: Strong. Scared, but determined. And tired, yet existing outside the need for normal rest.

"Soon, do you think?"

The Child gave no answer.

Pamir relinked and calibrated his laser. The high clouds had evaporated, their moisture stored and the bare ceiling reflecting the rich blackness below. How much longer? he wondered. And asked, again. And when he asked enough times, the Child responded, its nearest face saying, "I have no way of knowing. . . ."

If Samara just waited, he thought.

If it just bided its time, weakening both of them—

—*what's that?*

Every face lifted. Something was felt. Heard. Pamir glanced at the sensors' readouts, a thousand signs of motion making his heart race.

"Now!" screamed the Child's nearest face.

A leathery, fanged face, and droplets of alien plague arced through the dry, dry air.

Not now, thought Pamir. "I'm not ready—!"

Through the closest orifice, in one titanic push, came life, unformed and full of energies bled from it as light and screaming white noise. The electrified screens were shattered. Winged monsters sprang from the plastic goo, born in flight, driving for the Child's center. And in reflex, fruits exploded. Living nets launched themselves, engulfing and slicing the enemy's bodies. Then the armed griffins, firing as a unit, evaporated the carcasses and broke the molecules, leaving an incandescent vapor that hung in the air, for an instant, before it was absorbed by a second wave of screaming winged bodies.

Pamir remembered to aim and fire, nanosecond pulses cutting. Boiling. Doing remarkably little good.

Samara was vast. Not as large as the Child, but its first assault killed as much as it lost, and it managed to absorb casualties from both sides, reshaping and reanimating the spoils, then launching those newborn troops.

Its second assault dwarfed the first.

The third nearly reached Pamir's hiding place, and he fired until he couldn't see, a haze of boiled blood hanging as a curtain before him.

"Retreat," said a voice.

The Child's? Was it?

Then came another sound. More distant, and louder. A piercing wail rose in the crimson fog. Pamir took a reflexive backward step, retreating deeper into the port, and he lifted the laser, and a long winged *something* plowed into the riverbed in front of him. Fresh cacti impaled its body. A serpentine neck extended, aiming for the port, for Pamir, falling short and dying with a musical roar. Then a smaller beast sprang from its lifeless head, and it too was grabbed by the spines, dying in turn. But then, after a half-pause, its corpse gave birth to a pair of wings—dragonfly-style; more delicate than smoke—and the wings flapped with an astonishing vigor, Pamir watching with a mixture of astonishment and fatalism. Wings with a thread-like body between, and what could such a little thing accomplish? Hardly anything, surely.

Behind him was a griffin, unnoticed until now.

With a paw encased in hyperfiber, it swatted the dragonfly.

The blast threw it and Pamir backward, deeper into the ancient machinery. Despite the glove, the paw was shattered. Despite the battle's roar, the captain heard the griffin shouting, "Retreat," with a plaintive, begging voice.

He ripped the laser's umbilical free, then ran through a maze of mirror-colored tunnels, reaching a downstream port, having enough time to replug and aim and fire for thirty seconds. He didn't need to be coached into retreating this time. "Go, go, go!" he screamed at himself. Strong, scared legs carried him past a third port. He stopped at the fourth, for just a moment, gazing at the sky and seeing a gaseous mass drifting overhead. Like a bubble, wasn't it? Detached from Samara's engorged Whole, and punctured, but somehow holding together and pushing itself along on jets of heated air. It was past him, falling with a certain stateliness, and he didn't see its explosive impact, Pamir diving underground and running again, the immortal hyperfiber shuddering and rolling around him.

He moved twenty kilometers through a sleeping purification system, then took a chance on resting. Then he ran another ten kilometers, and he had to dig his way through a damp black wall of earth to reach the surface. The false sun had been extinguished. By the Child . . . why give away free photons. . . ? Pamir could see by the light of fires, the blue electric discharges. And some brutalized little creature dragged itself to him, plugging its rectal umbilical into the Child, the voice saying, "Friend Pamir," and then, "What a fucking mess. . . !"

Nothing was going well.

Worst-case plans hadn't looked this black, and Pamir cursed himself for ever having felt optimism.

A glowing wall of unformed flesh was closing, moving like syrup down the riverbed, and the captain fired until the fumes condensed on his pitted faceplate, half-blinding him. A griffin arrived, shouting, "Hold on. Here!" And beating its wings, fighting gravity and its own exhaustion, it lifted him and his armored suit and the precious laser out of immediate danger, Samara's advance made negligible by the distance.

How long had they been fighting?

A full day, he realized. But it felt like ten minutes, or a year. He found himself bouncing between wild excitement and a drugged hunger for sleep.

The griffin took him over the flat dry sands—a sudden desert—and landed at a prearranged, marginally secure place where he could rest, and watch. It was one of the original control stations, a kilometer-tall ridge of hyperfiber covered with leathery skin and spines; and Pamir told the griffin to wait, giving it his laser and saying the obvious:

"You can do more with this than I can."

Not that it made a difference, one way or the other.

He took drugs to sleep, then woke when a distant blast lit the cavern from end to end. The juncture between the two gaians was a U-shaped line, the Child holding the interior, Samara attacking the stems in irregular, unpredictable bursts, plainly striving to collapse the U into a tiny circle set in the middle of the defenseless sands.

"I don't believe this," muttered Pamir, mystified by Samara's size and its effortless success. How could the captains hope to control such an organism? "If it wants," he told himself, in a near-whisper, "it could take the whole ship for itself."

"I told you so," said a familiar voice.

A small hand touched the captain's shoulder, setting off an alarm in his armored suit.

He jumped and spun around, finding a child-like figure staring up at him. Another resurrected figure; it was identical to the body he had interrogated some thousand years ago.

"I told you," the Child repeated, a grim expression lit by the glare of lasers. "It's black-hearted and treacherous. Didn't you believe me?"

"Not well enough," he confessed.

That body was their last hope. If the Child was doomed, Pamir and this tiny totipotent construction would retreat, and the ship's sheer volume would give them places to hide. Unless of course Samara could wrest control of the ship away from its captains.

"Keep fighting," Pamir advised.

The Child never quit its struggle, but after another two days it held nothing but the central sands and Pamir's little ridge.

A single, encircling attack began.

Bloodied, half-dead griffins landed at the bunker, desperate for nourishment. They fed through umbilicals and their mouths, and they fired the last functioning lasers. Another great bubble rose out of Samara, pushing itself overhead, then dove and spread like an octopus, engulfing everything in its reach. The nearest semiliquid tendril flowed up the slope, within a hundred meters of Pamir; and he could smell it—a sweet, almost delicate fragrance—and ten griffins were killed when its flesh turned explosive, the blast hotter than a sun.

The Child's lifeboat body, dressed in its own armored suit, turned and gave Pamir a little nod, then a despairing smile.

Beside them was a wall of controls.

Ancient.

Asleep.

With a captain's authority, Pamir initiated a series of commands, coaxing the machinery into wakefulness, telling the systems that things here were an awful mess, then defining Samara as a grievous toxic spill.

With a dull grinding rumble, creations older than worlds awoke.

Then busied themselves with housekeeping.

Vast and cunning, perhaps. But Samara seemed taken by surprise.

Great twisting chunks of it were sucked into the ports, chopped into smaller pieces, their water pulled free and purified while the organics were torn down to their atoms, stripped of identity and purpose, then stored in coffers until needed by *the ship.*

For several days, with an orchestrated, professional brutality, Pamir fought the gaian. Samara was forced to retreat, and it shrank, and the Child grew to where it held half of the cavern's floor again.

Then the machinery faltered.

It was its age, in part. And it was because Samara slipped into the old guts, finding ways to sabotage weak systems and confound the others. The gaian war settled into a stalemate. Pamir lost control over a succession of systems. The Child attempted one last counterattack, and it failed, bodies retreating, struggling to destroy everything of use between them and the ridge.

There were no more griffins. Weaker, smaller bodies fired the unwielding lasers, and Samara came across the bare sands, its Whole exposed and very nearly exhausted, too.

"Look," said the lifeboat body. "It's beaten, almost."

Samara was like a ring of pudding, glowing with a feeble cold light. Pamir could tell that its new bodies were coming more slowly. And none possessed the fight and fire of the originals.

But the Child was just a few hundred hectares of scales and spines laid over hyperfiber. Pamir stepped out of his bunker to take inventory, and he was struck hard, knocked flat and left senseless. The lifeboat body dragged him back into cover. There he discovered that his helmet was cracked, and a captainly part of him tried calculating what kind of blow would be needed to split this grade of hyperfiber—

—and the Child cried out, "It's time! To go!"

A final, beaten retreat.

"Take me," begged the little body, pushing the last laser into his hands.

"Will you? To the car?"

There was a hidden, secure escape route. Of course Pamir would take it out of here. Gladly, with utter devotion. Aiming a battered laser at nothing, coming around each turn of the hallway to find nothing barring their way, he took them deeper into the ridge . . . then hesitated, something feeling wrong as he turned . . . and the hallway behind him as empty as the one ahead. *Where was the Child. . . ?*

Outside, Samara was making a final charge.

Pamir heard its great wet roar, then an explosion. The last of the Child's spare flesh changed its nature, combusting with a yellowish light that rapidly faded, accomplishing little. But Pamir saw the light through a side hallway, which meant some sort of passageway to the surface. He turned and ran up a set of steep stairs, then stopped as he saw a figure silhouetted against the darkened sky. It was dressed in armor, standing on scaffolding beside a huge apparatus that shouldn't be there. A gemstone and metal apparatus, perched high on top of a makeshift fuel tank. Pamir recognized the device but couldn't find the name. He knew it, but *why* did he know it?

Mounting the last stairs, he whispered, "Oh, shit—"

This was the motor of a starship, a ship recently sold as scrap—according to records—and with a mixture of astonishment and horror, Pamir realized the obvious: If one gaian could manipulate the truth, then why couldn't every other gaian, too?

The stardrive stood tall in a vertical room—a room cut from many smaller rooms.

Nothing was above but the huge bowl-shaped ceiling.

Oblivious to the captain, the Child took a seat, gripping a simple control. Then it paused for an instant, watching a monitor, examining images of the cavern and its nemesis. Pamir dropped his laser and began to climb, able to see the Child smiling, a cold razored serenity in the eyes and the little mouth pursing, then remarking with an acidic certainty:

"Now, you die."

Pamir read the lips, then saw the Child squeeze the control.

There was a flash of light and plasmas, a sun born, jumping to the ceiling and scattering; and Pamir dove behind the Child to save himself, guessing everything in a instant, including the scope of his own dear ignorance.

Samara—the bulk of it—was turned to gas and ash.

Later that day, they found one surviving body huddling under a pile of half-melted desiccators. Like the child, it was the original human form. But despite having lost, the gaian acted amused, cocky and sharp-tongued. "What did you accomplish?" it asked, using a mocking voice. "Nothing, of course. More like me are coming, and they know what I know. Who cares if it takes millennia to kill *that?*"

Pamir was holding the laser, and the Child said, "Kill it."

Samara's green-gold eyes found the captain. "The Monster is prepared for a million-year hunt." With glee, it asked, "What could be more patient than a vengeful gaian?"

The Child moved to strike it, or worse.

Pamir stopped his friend, with a warning and then the laser. "I want to hear this. Don't. Stand back." There was nowhere to plug the weapon's umbilical, but its batteries were fully charged. Turning to Samara, he asked, "Why vengeance? Tell me."

A hopeful look, then it said, "The Child lied to you—"

"No!"

Pamir fired a burst, then said, "Quiet."

"My home world was a simple place, yes." Samara nodded, the smile softening. "Ungaian, yes. Those parts of the story aren't too awfully wrong."

"Go on."

The creature's eyes could see that world as the words poured from it. "Perhaps its life seemed cruel to Aeon, but cruelty implies intent, doesn't it? And since there was no great linking mind, how could that world be held accountable for any crimes?"

The Child struggled not to move, not to speak.

"My world had no self, no soul, but Aeon gave it both. And it gave the world a name: The Child." A pause. "Before it became the Monster, it was Aeon's little offspring, weak and aware of its weaknesses. But stronger by the century, and more self-aware. And like every child born, it imagined its future, and how it would act differently than its parent, and maybe it would improve on Aeon's ways. . . ."

Pamir nodded as he listened.

Samara looked at the other gaian, with an expression more complex than mere disgust. "They fought, of course. And like it admits, Aeon wouldn't share its abundant waters. But more than that, other resources were rationed, and certain knowledge was forbidden. Aeon demanded oaths of fealty, then physical acts to prove the same. But no proof was adequate. The Child gave and gave of itself, begging for acceptance and winning none. With every word, every gesture, Aeon would find flaws, minuscule and oftentimes invented. And when the Child tried to claim freedom, its parent . . . Aeon . . . would curse it. . . ."

The creature was panting, emotions twisting its face.

"That bridge between them. . . ? Built by Aeon, for Aeon. To help it maintain control." A deep, wet gasp. "It sent griffins, armies of them, to teach the Child to behave—"

"Lies," spat the other gaian.

"—and Aeon put mirrors in space, bringing droughts and endless dust storms. 'I'm hurting you in order to teach you,' it would say. 'I am doing these things to help you, Child.' "

Pamir felt weak, chilled.

"And when the Child wouldn't surrender, Aeon decided to murder it. To take the poor little world for itself." A pause, a hearty smile. "But you can guess the rest, can't you? All that effort to teach the Child, and what was learned? The vagaries of misery and treachery, naturally. And the Child put each good lesson to work.

"And it won, in time. . . ."

Pamir anticipated his friend's leap, and he fired, leaving a pool of remelted hyperfiber between them.

The laser's batteries were half-drained, he noted.

"Lies," the current Child repeated. In earnest.

Pamir didn't point out the obvious: If gaians could mold flesh however they wished, couldn't they mold memories with the same certainty? And rob their capacity to doubt the stories chiseled into their souls. . . ?

Instead he turned to his friend, asking, "Where did you find that stardrive?"

A watery look, then resolve.

"I saw the records. It was bought by an alien." He named the species, then the individual. "Do you know that alien?"

Resolve became haughtiness. "I may have met it, yes."

"How?"

Silence.

"Of course you've met it. I'm rarely here. What if you let a few select explorers come here while I'm away?" Like the faithful, cheated lover, Pamir realized that he must have imagined the unfaithfulness countless times. The Child had lied, and what's more, Pamir had lied to himself, without hesitation. "A few aliens with money, and you entertained them, and they loved you . . . and after ten centuries, you built a network of helping hands, and eyes—"

"How can it possibly matter, friend Pamir? I don't understand."

"I learned about Samara's arrival, and I came here to tell you . . . but you already knew, didn't you. . . ?"

Silence.

Despite himself, Pamir began to weep, the laser shaking in his weary, aged arms.

"I don't love them, I love *you,*" the Child professed, starting to reach for him. "But what if something happened to you? An accident could have happened, and I needed safeguards."

Pamir used silence now.

"Safeguards," the Child repeated, in a mutter.

The captain turned to Samara, saying, "More like you will arrive. Is that right?"

"Many," it replied. "Each more clever than the last."

"You have to kill it," the Child begged. "Hurry."

"But what if this one is dead?" He asked Samara the question, watching the green-gold eyes. "Will they threaten the ship?"

"Never. They'll want vengeance, nothing more."

He looked at the Child, its face changing, alarm building as both hands lifted, seemingly pushing against an invisible set of bars—

—and the captain announced, "All right."

He said, "I've decided what I will do."

The tears had stopped flowing. His arms held the weapon very still, two bursts were fired and the air filled with the vivid stink of evaporated flesh, and steam, and the brief beginnings of twin screams cut short by the boiling of their respective tongues.

"We're chasing you. I saw the arrest warrant for myself."

"I know. I've seen it, too."

"You destroyed that entire facility. If we didn't have those water reserves, we'd already be drinking our own urine."

"I know," said Pamir. "I built up those reserves."

"Mention that at the trial," Washen advised, taking a tentative step toward the fugitive. "Whatever's happened, you need to turn yourself in and let the Submasters examine the evidence—"

"Washen? I'm guilty."

"What do you know? You're not a Submaster."

Pamir actually laughed, looking across the big room. Her home was rather like his, except cleaner. Against one wall, in a tiny, rootbound pot, a tired clump of llano-vibra sang in hushed voices about everlasting love. "Are you curious about what happened down there?"

"Tell me," she demanded.

He shook his head. "Sorry. I can't."

She took another step, asking, "Will you turn yourself in to me?"

"No."

"Will you surrender to anyone?"

"Not intentionally, no."

She paused, probably wondering if she could physically restrain him. Not now, not in these circumstances. In a quiet, calculating voice, she said, "I don't see why you sneaked in here, frankly."

"I've got a gift for you."

She exhaled, entirely surprised.

"You advised me to give gifts, didn't you?"

Washen asked, "What is it?"

He laid a biovial on the nearest tabletop, then passed his laser to his other hand, yanking a memo chip from his trousers' pocket. "These are the instructions." It was the same chip that she had given him, resembling a worn snowflake. "It's all pretty straightforward, really. If you're willing to help me."

"What happened down there? Give me that much."

The homely face grinned. "Study the chip. Do whatever you believe is right, but study it first. Promise?"

She nodded, then said, "You look different. I barely recognized you, at first glance."

"I'm out of uniform," he replied.

"No, it's not that." She shook her head, her expression drifting into pity and gloom. "Where will you go, Pamir?"

He said nothing.

"We won't stop hunting you."

The grin brightened. He stepped to one side and past her, making for Washen's emergency hatch. "Good-bye, darling. And thank you."

Desperate to delay him, Washen grabbed the vial, threatening to smash it if he didn't confess what was inside it.

Pamir gave a backward glance. "Flesh. Living flesh."

"Yours?"

"Yes. And theirs too."

"Whose?" she asked.

He stepped through the open hatch.

"Who else, Pamir?"

Then the hatch closed, a blast of light melting its mechanisms; and after a moment's contemplation, Washen set down the biovial and picked up the old memo chip, tapping it as if to coax the answers to spring forth, explaining every mystery without fuss, without delay.

She called him the Child, and she called herself his mother, even when both knew that no part of her was incorporated into him. And the Child lived in his mother's home, growing faster than human children but requiring much longer to mature. His talents were baffling and incomplete. His mistakes were painful for both him and his botched creations. But he persisted with his education, imagining the future, some grand part of him eager to become vast, and powerful, and wise.

His mother-who-wasn't-his-mother told him what little she knew.

When the Child dreamt of the past—worlds he didn't know; violence beyond measure—she would comfort him, wetting his forehead with damp rags while saying, "That isn't you. You are not *them.*"

Yet *they* were part of him.

Tiny, tiny bodies floated inside each of his myriad cells, giving him almost magical powers over flesh and bone.

"*They* were enemies. They came here and fought—a terrible, brutal fight—and they killed each other."

"But why, Mother?"

She didn't know, but she made guesses. Greed and jealousy, and fear. All human emotions. Then she added, "Little parts of each one survived. Not enough to remake either of them, but when combined, with human flesh as a binding agent . . . well, that's you. You."

The human was his father. The Child couldn't stop asking about him.

"I don't know where he is," said his mother, her expression grave. Sorrowful. "I don't even know if he's alive anymore."

"I'll find him," he'd promise both of them.

But one day, instead of acting happy, Mother shook her head and told him, "You won't, no. You're getting too strong, too skilled. I think it's time that you leave."

Leave what? This apartment?

"No, the ship." She showed him images of a world, young and barely living. Its sun was ruddy and big in the sky. Its oceans were thick with organics and simple bugs. "Your father left instructions. Once you were ready, he wanted you to go to a place like this to live. Do you like it?"

Not at all. In the Child's mind, it seemed ugly.

Yet then again, the prospect of embracing an entire world seemed wondrous. Even inevitable.

They went to one of the great ship's ports, to a tiny shuttle that would carry him to the new world. Kneeling before him, Mother straightened his useless clothes, and she wept, saying, "Remember. Two of your parents hated each other so thoroughly that they couldn't see anything else. They lived badly, and they hurt one another, and how do you erase their terrible crimes. . . ?"

"By living properly," he replied, with feeling.

"What does 'properly' mean?"

"With kindness to all of my parts, and to whatever lifeforms that I meet along the way."

She sobbed and said, "Be good."

The eternal motherly advice.

Suddenly the child looked over her shoulder, focusing on something distant.

"A man—"

She turned.

"—was watching me. But he's gone now."

"Did he look like you?"

"Maybe." He thought harder, then said, "No, he didn't. He was much better looking than me."

She straightened his clothes again, always smiling.

"I think you're lovely," she told him. "Just beautiful, if you ask me." ●

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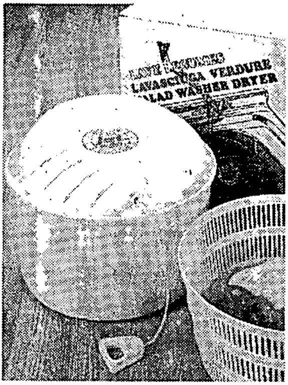

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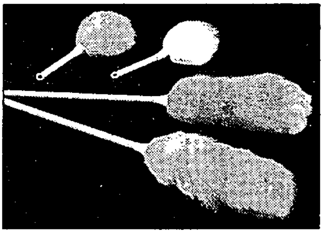

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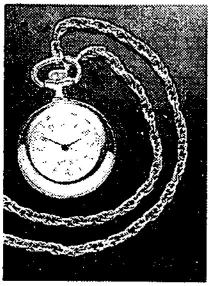

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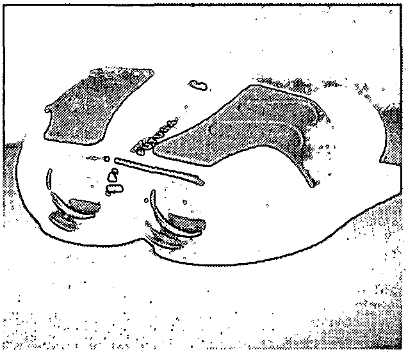

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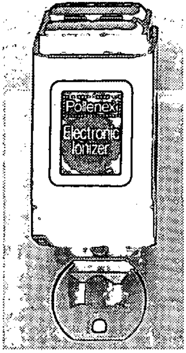

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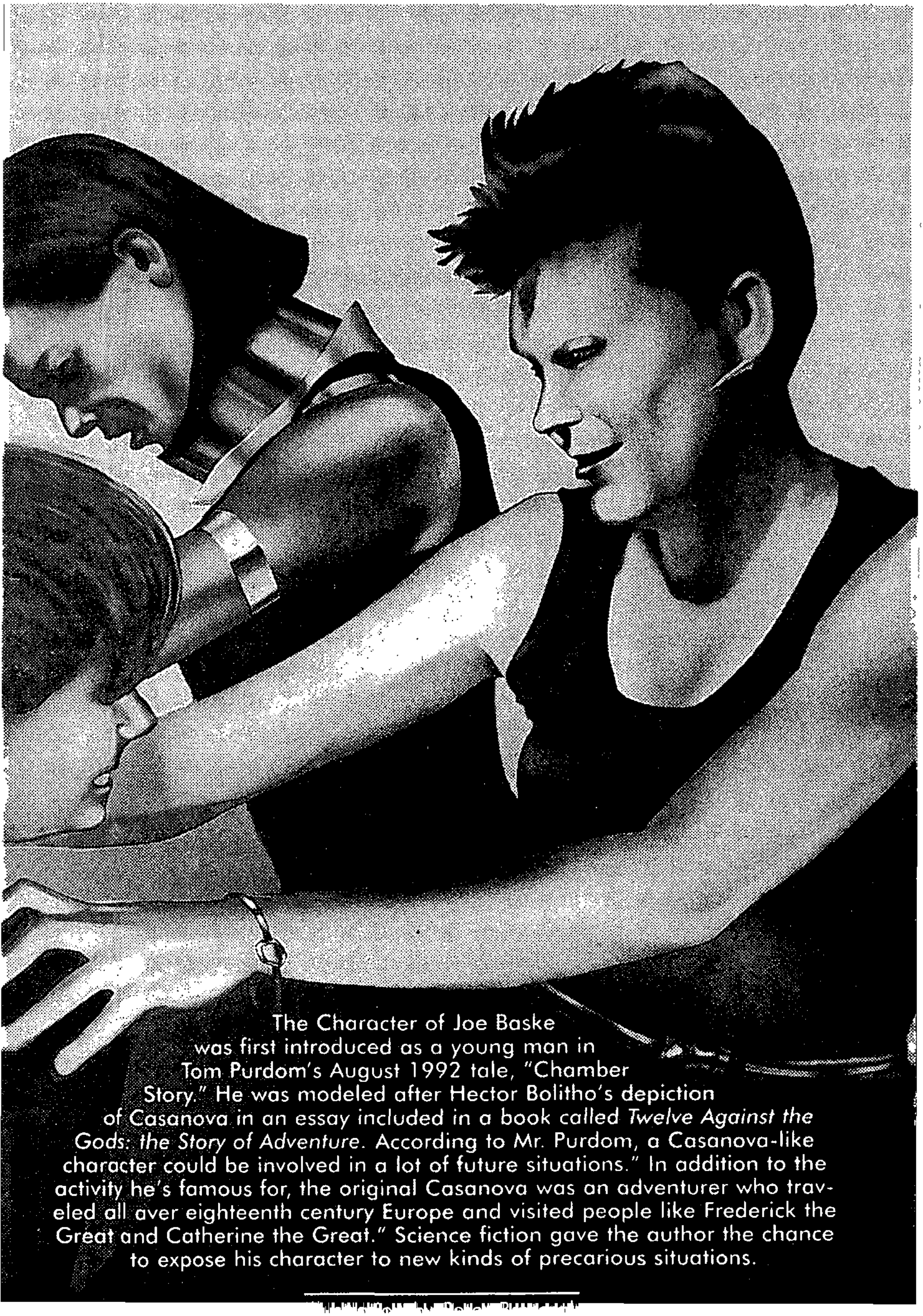
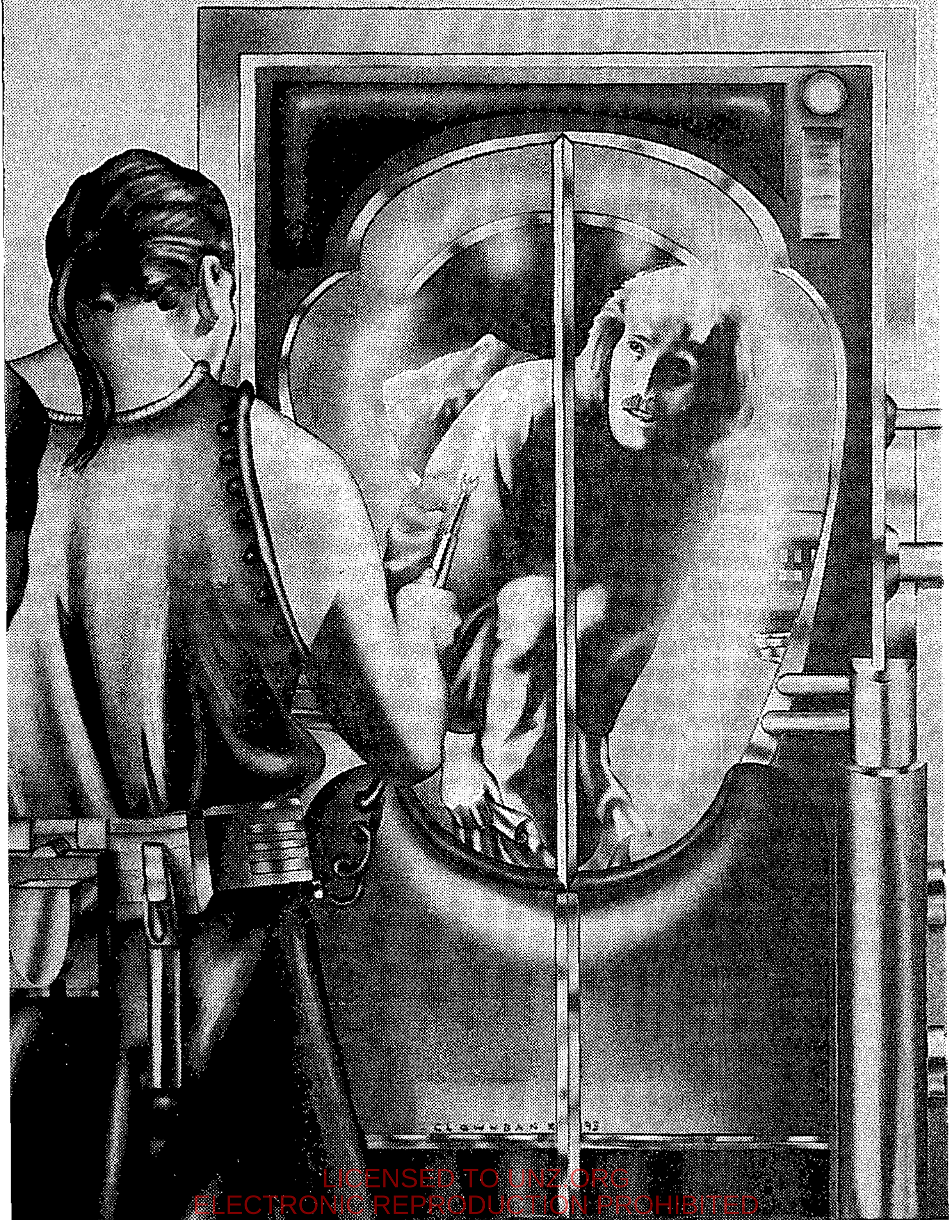


The Character of Joe Baske was first introduced as a young man in Tom Purdom's August 1992 tale, "Chamber Story." He was modeled after Hector Bolitho's depiction of Casanova in an essay included in a book called *Twelve Against the Gods: the Story of Adventure*. According to Mr. Purdom, a Casanova-like character could be involved in a lot of future situations." In addition to the activity he's famous for, the original Casanova was an adventurer who traveled all over eighteenth century Europe and visited people like Frederick the Great and Catherine the Great." Science fiction gave the author the chance to expose his character to new kinds of precarious situations.

Tom Purdom

ROMANCE IN LUNAR G



I was almost sixty when I finally read Casanova's memoirs. People had been telling me I should read Casanova ever since I had reached my late twenties, but I probably wouldn't have read him when I was fifty-eight if my finances had been in shape. I had been caught in the whirlwind that raced through the currency markets in 2054. It took me six months to get back to the point where I could face a restaurant bill without cringing.

It wasn't hard to understand why readers who were familiar with the memoirs thought I would find them interesting. I had always assumed Casanova was a mere compulsive—a man who was trying to run up a score. Instead, I discovered the pages of his autobiography are crowded with statements I could have written myself. If three competent behavioral physiologists read a random sample taken from all twelve volumes, at least two of them would be absolutely convinced he and I could be described with the same parameters.

There was, of course, a significant difference in our circumstances. Casanova never knew that his responses to women could be traced to a few thousand cells in two precisely mapped areas of his brain. He didn't have to live with the knowledge he could slip into a modification clinic and permanently dampen the emotions that dominated his life. In his world, character was destiny—not personal choice.

"You're supposed to be watching the scenery," Shezuko said.

We were standing on the observation deck, watching the sunrise as it tapped the upper reaches of the lunar mountains in front of us, and Shezuko had noticed the look on my face when Malita Divora and Wen Kang had stepped out of the elevator. The big cruise vehicle was crawling along the dark side of the terminator, in the exact spot the sales spiels had promised it would occupy at this moment. One hundred and forty-eight people had arranged themselves in front of the oval viewing windows that faced the sunrise. One hundred and forty-seven were staring at the gleaming, rounded summits that floated over a landscape illuminated by dim blue Earthlight.

Shezuko was smiling, but she wasn't laughing at me. Of all the women who've befriended me, I think she understood me the best.

It was one of the blacker moments in one of the blacker periods of my life. At dinner the night before, Malita had chosen a table next to ours and systematically flaunted her relationship with Wen. Every time I had glanced their way, Malita had been looking at Wen as if she wanted to record every word he was saying. I had managed to keep up a conversation with Shezuko but I can still remember most of the things they talked about. Over the salad, Wen told her anecdotes about one of his mother's more famous conquests. Over the rice and rabbit, with apple and mushroom sauce (I remember every detail!), Wen compared the two sports that had given him his biggest taste of celebrity and Malita chatted about the discontents of the children she had interviewed for a piece on long-term marriage arrangements. Over dessert (an outlandish helping of fruit and whipped cream which Wen consumed with outlandish enthusiasm), she led Wen into a little shop talk and they dissected the pros and cons of the one subject that seems to fascinate journalists and most of the other people who work with the databanks: the benefits of pay-per-view versus flat-rate listings.

I have always avoided the embarrassments of jealousy. It is a childish emotion that has nothing to do with the passions I have spent my life cultivating. In this case, I even knew they had both opted for major reductions in their sex drives, so they could concentrate on "aspects of life we find more satisfying." They had actually gone to the extra expense of renting separate cabins. I was dealing, however, with an intelligent, creative woman who had decided to evict me from her life. When they had left the table, it had been obvious Wen was going to join her in her quarters.

Now, fifteen hours after I had last seen her, Malita paused two steps from the elevator and tipped back her head when she saw me looking at her. Wen Kang rested his hand on her shoulder and soaked in the atmosphere with the honest pleasure of someone who loved the human glitter in the foreground as much as he loved the panorama outside. Lunar society was going through one of those periods when men wear their hair long and women crop it close—a fashion that emphasized Wen's fleshy sensuality and Malita's alert, restless intelligence.

"I still find it difficult to believe you feel the rewards outweigh the disadvantages," Shezuko said. "I would think that for someone who loves pleasure as much as you do . . ."

"Is it any different for you?" I said. "Are your feelings any different from mine when you reach the end of an encounter?"

"But I know I'm going to enjoy myself first. For you—there's no guarantee you'll enjoy anything."

If you've ever spent any time with Shezuko Okada's work, you know sexual love is as important to her as it is to me. The aesthetic and emotional impact of her fantasies rests on a single poignancy: the fact that the most intense and devoted bondings must inevitably yield to time. In the middle of her sixth decade, she had made a very sensible decision and opted for a personality modification that eliminated the kind of unpleasantness I was experiencing. Her passions didn't burst into flame until she knew they were based on a mutual attraction. Her involvements were just as intense as mine—and most of them didn't last any longer—but Shezuko knew they would traverse a predictable arc.

Wen and Malita joined a foursome that included a genetic engineer who had been living on the Moon since the first laboratory complex had been carved into the rim of Eratosthenes crater. Every time I sneaked a glance in their direction—which was about once every minute—Malita was responding to the engineer's pronouncements with the animation that characterized everything she did. She was one of those conversationalists who look just as sprightly when they're listening as they do when they're talking.

It was Wen who came bustling toward me half an hour after they'd entered the observation deck. Malita dragged after him as if she was being pulled by the hand. For a moment she looked like she might even have the decency to feel embarrassed. Then she smiled at me over the scent rose she was carrying—a prop that she swayed across her face with a gesture I found particularly elegant.

Wen likes anyone who's led an adventurous life. He knew all about the little comedy I was playing with Malita but he had been striking up conversations with me ever since he and Malita had become friends. Now he waved his arms at the scenery and launched into one of his impersonations of the Man of Gusto.

"This is the first time I've ever felt like I understood what Neil Armstrong meant," Wen said. "What else can you say when you look at a scene like this? 'Isn't that something?' How else could you put it? It's amazing how a trip like this can affect someone who's spent his whole life on Luna. It's been twenty years since I spent this much time Topside. We're going to be leaving the cruiser in a couple of hours—for a little side trip we've been planning—but I wanted you to know I'm going to miss having you and Shezuko with us, Joe."

The liquid sloshing in Wen's glass was a bubbly, silvery concoction I had seen him drink before. He had been afflicted with random fits of depression ever since he had been a teenager. The bubbles and the silver glitter were a good indication he had chosen an active ingredient that elevated his mood. He had tried to eliminate the depression problem at one point, but he had discovered a permanent modification would affect several of the qualities he valued.

My own drink at the moment was a pleasant, mildly stringent item that was very popular on the Moon. It was laced, fortunately, with the faintest touch of a weak socializer. If it had contained anything less inhibiting, I might have started screaming.

I had spent half my remaining funds on this cruise. Malita had *urged* me to take it. She had called me up to discuss it. She had described the whole experience as if she was preparing a personal travelogue. She had indicated I would be part of her social circle.

I could have seen what she was doing three hours after I stepped on the cruiser. She had told me from the very beginning—on the very day I had seen her for the first time, chatting in a restaurant in Eratosthenes—that she didn't have the slightest interest in the kind of emotional adventure I could offer. Now she had apparently embarked on a campaign—and I had been doggedly ignoring all the warning signs my common sense had been pointing out. If I hadn't learned she was telling me the truth after eight months of futile efforts, she would make the pursuit so unpleasant—and costly—it would eventually become unbearable.

There is no way I can overemphasize my feelings, Malita had said. *I am not interested in emotionally intense sexual relationships. I'm not even interested in relationships in which the emotional intensity is all on one side. I've had all the emotional turbulence I want or need. I'm sorry your erotic feelings have become fixated on me. I'm sorry it's causing you discomfort and turmoil. I'm not going to let you into my life—even for a short time—merely because a random psychological process has generated feelings that you happen to consider important.*

I drew myself up and managed a socially correct look of surprise. Malita had dropped her head to her rose as soon as she had seen the emotions that had crossed my face.

"What can you possibly do out there that you can't do here?" I said.

It was a reasonable question. Wherever you go on the Moon, you're Inside and the natural environment is Outside. The important thing is making sure you're surrounded by an inside that's comfortable.

Wen's chief political adviser, Hai Jung-He, had accompanied him on the cruise. Hai had been slouching in a recliner near the "stern" of the observation deck, but he had started working his way toward us as soon as he had seen Wen was talking to me. Wen and I are both a little short by contemporary standards, so we both had to tip our heads back when he loomed over us.

Hai tended to stay in the background when Wen was socializing, but he was always there. It would have been hard not to be conscious he was there, in fact. For the first ten years of his life, Hai and his mother had lived on an income that was so close to survival level she couldn't afford optional medical services. It's my understanding the poor woman worked for one of those enterprises that attract customers by telling them real flesh and blood human females direct the responses of the simulations. By the time she could afford the appropriate treatments, her son had become a medical illustration: a human male who had responded to low gravity by developing bird bones and the kind of height that condemns you to a life of awkward tables and cramped hotel beds.

"Wen tells me he's leaving the cruiser for a side trip," I said. "Is there really anything out there that's more spectacular than the scenery we're scheduled to pass?"

Wen smiled. He leaned forward and gave me a conspiratorial pat with the back of his free hand. "We're having an adventure, Joseph. A *journalistic* adventure."

Hai frowned. A touch of consternation crossed Malita's face.

Hai lowered his head and rested his hand on Wen's shoulder. Hai was one of the most self-controlled people I had ever met, but it was obvious Wen had let his drink carry him to elevations he should have avoided.

Malita was examining me with the intense, crinkly eyed curiosity she had directed at me on other occasions. It was a look that gave you the feeling she was noting every move you made and constructing a detailed, carefully reasoned picture of every feeling and thought that was passing through your consciousness. She had once told an interviewer her great strength was intelligence, not talent. *You really have to be endowed with a specialized talent*, she had argued, *if you want to reach the highest level in any creative field—if you want to make it into the upper one half of 1 percent. With intelligence, you can only work your way into the upper 5 or 10 percent, and it usually takes an incredible effort. But the rewards can be very satisfying.*

I straightened up. I would have sacrificed the other half of my funds just to have a private farewell drink with her, but I knew I would be acting like a fool if I even suggested the idea. "It's going to be a duller trip without you, Wen. Are you going to rejoin us later?"

"We're not certain," Hai said. "Right now it looks unlikely."

Wen could slip into his politician's persona as if he was putting on a costume. He clapped me on the shoulder and his automatic responses took over. "I'll call you when we all get back to Era, Joe. I've got a little get-together planned for late next month. I think you'll find it's your kind of thing."

Shezuko shook her head when she saw me staring at Malita as they walked away. "Would it make you feel better if we played some Bach, young man?"

Shezuko had brought a small harpsichord—the kind you can rest on a table—and we had already fulfilled a minor fantasy and played together while the scenery drifted past us. Now I realized an hour with Bach was just what I needed. It would also give me an excuse to return to my cabin. Malita had knocked me into a state of shock but I wasn't as lightheaded as Wen seemed to be. I would never recover the capital I had tossed away when I had walked into Malita's trap, but Wen's slip might help me recoup a few percent of it.

My eyes drifted toward a notably distracting young woman as I approached the elevator. I had noticed her on the first day of the cruise and she was probably the only woman on the entire passenger list who could still penetrate the mood Malita had created. She was one of those people who attract your attention because they seem to radiate health and physical opulence. The long lines of her body looked like they had been shaped by a sculptor who wanted to create a portrait of the perfect female athlete. She was so striking, in fact, that it took me a moment to realize she had been watching *me.*

I pulled out my notescreen and transmitted a memo as soon as the cabin door clicked shut. My violin had been stored in an under-the-bed drawer, cushioned by the padding provided by my highdress clothing. By the time I stood up, the cabin was advising me I had a call.

The woman whose face appeared on the wall screen called herself Chindraka Hindaja. She had contacted me a few days after I docked at Eratosthenes and shown me a blue card that proved she worked for an organization that could pay me a small retainer and a large hourly rate. She was engaged in a type of work that is sometimes referred to as "preventive peacekeeping." Her employers on Earth wanted to keep track of the things the new cities on the Moon were doing.

I am basically apolitical but I have always believed that a technological society needs the kind of minimal international government we've developed on Earth. I've never agreed with the people who think we can let human beings colonize the Moon and the asteroids without imposing some degree of law on their activities. And it was, after all, an easy way to accumulate extra funds. She wasn't asking me to *spy* on the people I met. She just wanted information any observant gadabout might come across.

"In another three hours," Chindraka said, "you'll be a two hour drive from Simon Razagella's hideaway. Does that sound like the kind of *adventure* Wen Kang would be interested in?"

I nodded. I didn't ask her how she knew where the hideaway was located, of course.

"Razagella's just the kind of person Wen finds irresistible," I said. "He said it was a journalistic adventure. If he's found out where Razagella's hiding, he probably thinks he can get an interview."

"I would imagine it would be a lucrative project."

Wen was the only politician I've ever met who supported himself by churning out journalism. His only political position at that time was a precarious hold on a seat in the lower tier of the Eratosthenes Legislative Assembly. The income that maintained his standard of living came from interviews, opinion pieces, travel narratives, and backlog items like his accounts of his father's adventures in the asteroid belt. Most people thought he lived off an inheritance. They didn't realize the only help he received from his ancestors was the money his mother sometimes wheedled out of the men in her life.

"He'd still have to get inside the hideaway," I said. "He's a very persuasive person, but I can't believe Razagella will hand him an interview just because he's Wen Kang."

"That's one of the things I find interesting. Wen's spent a lot of money on this pleasure trip. If he did it just so he could get an interview, he must be confident he'll be successful. There's also the question of how he found out where Razagella's located. This is the first time we've had any evidence anyone else had that information."

"He's Wen Kang. He must know half the people worth knowing on the Moon."

"It's still the kind of thing that raises questions," Chindraka said. "Would you be willing to follow them? For the usual day rate?"

She smiled. "You've got the perfect cover, it seems to me."

I shook my head. She was a very intelligent woman but she had made the same mistake many people make.

"That's not my style," I said. "I don't make a nuisance of myself. It's one thing to buy a passage on this overgrown tractor just so I can maintain a normal social contact. It's another thing to go pursuing Malita across the wilderness when she's working on a private matter."

"From what I hear, Joseph, it won't make much difference anyway. You may even get to spend some extra time in her irresistible presence. It may not be the kind of contact you're most interested in, but it will be something."

I had reached my eighth decade when I fell in love with Malita, but I had only acquired two enhancements of any importance. One (as you won't be surprised to hear) provided me with almost total control over the physiological aspects of my sexual responses. That's an important matter to many women (though not all). The other enhancement was a musical performance system I purchased in the first years performance systems were available. I had been captivated by someone I still remember with great pleasure—a young entrepreneur who had enhanced her whole life when she had installed her first performance system and started playing the wooden eighteenth century flute. The only people she saw after business hours were the people who played with her. I installed a system that gave me the ability to play the short-necked, lightly strung eighteenth century violin and managed to join her social circle six weeks after she had first seized my imagination. I had to pay a ridiculous price for special lessons in Baroque style and performance practice, but I have never made an investment that gave me a more satisfactory return.

I have installed new information molecules in my nervous system as upgrades have become available, but I have never changed instruments. I seem to have an affinity for the music of the eighteenth century.

The first time I had fallen in love I had been seven and the twenty-first century had been three. There was a Frenchman once who said that love is the illusion that women differ. The more rational side of my personality sometimes tells me he may have been right; my emotions have their own opinion. Human beings are the product of a long process of natural selection. The process obviously had to favor people who respond to the opposite sex. In some of us, that tendency has been carried to an extreme—just as some people are taller or more muscular. For me, there is nothing in the entire universe more exciting than a woman—her face, the lines of her body, the intricacies of her personality.

It's true that my feelings always fade. I've never tested the area of my brain that determines your position on the monogamy-polygamy scale, but I'm confident I could predict the result. Thanks to one part of my brain structure, I live in a universe filled with dazzling, glittering women. Thanks to another part, I always know that sooner or later there will be another face, another combination of personality and physical grace. . . .

My particular cluster of personality traits may not satisfy people who would like to fabricate the ideal human, but I have tried to satisfy my impulses without creating too much trouble for the women who capture my emotions. For most of them, the days they have spent with me haven't been that different from their encounters with other men. The only difference is the spice of the extra intensity I bring to the affair.

And haven't my adventures granted me gifts I could have acquired in no other way? I have loved architects, engineers, musicians, politicians, geologists, surgeons, athletes, economists, and women who approached activities like diving and mountaineering with the same passion I have lavished on the central concern of my life. From all of them I have learned something. The shortest route to someone's affections—male or female—is to *listen*.

But there was no way I could deny the other side of the equation. Money that had been accumulated in years had been squandered in days. Jealous rivals had pursued me. To Chindraka I was a figure of fun—a foolish man, approaching the end of his first century, who still believed he would spend the rest of his days in misery if a particular woman excluded him from her life.

I had explored most of the modification options catalogued in the databanks when I had first settled into my apartment in Eratosthenes. I had come to the Moon to escape the consequences of an exceptionally imprudent adventure. My activities had disturbed the business associates of a woman who occupied a key position in the economic rivalries that shape the affairs of the Eastern Mediterranean medical complex. For the first time in my life I found myself thinking I might have reached the limits of my capacity for turmoil.

I had once spent six weeks in the hospital, recovering from a severed spinal cord, because an unexpectedly dangerous husband pursued me down an unfamiliar road when I left his house on a motorcycle. This time, I had been forced to leave the Earth itself—my *world*, the natural home of mankind!—because I had received a well worded threat from an organization that possessed a formidable capacity to carry it out. Wasn't it time I faced the fact that one of my escapades was eventually going to culminate in a disaster that couldn't be repaired?

I didn't have to weaken my responses to women, of course. That would be the simplest and least expensive modification, but there were other possibilities. I could choose the same modification Shezuko had picked. I could even eliminate my feelings for a particular person and leave my basic personality intact. That would be a slightly risky, exceptionally expensive option but it was probably possible.

I had been toying with the possibilities for over a year when I had encountered Malita and the initial rush of excitement had pushed the idea out of my head. It had been almost three months before I had admitted I was staring at a woman who had surrounded herself with a seamless glass wall.

I had been living for exactly seven years and five months the first time I had been tormented by the emotions Malita had evoked. Was I going to be experiencing this kind of gloom and misery two hundred years from now? Or a thousand?

Fortunately, Shezuko didn't harass me with nagging attempts to convert me to her view. We were both feeling quite relaxed, in fact, as we drove across the lunar landscape toward the obscure crater in which "informed sources" claimed Simon Razagella had built his hermitage. Our hour with Bach had been followed by the kind of easy, utterly tensionless sexual interlude both of us found comforting. The only undiplomatic thought she mentioned was her surprise that I was following Wen and Malita. Unlike Chindraka, she knew that wasn't my style.

"Has Malita really affected you that much?" Shezuko said. "I know we're talking about feelings that are inherently irrational, but it seems to me you're dealing with someone who's made it very clear she's going to make things as unpleasant as she can."

Just to my left, through the dust floating around our windows, I could see the tracks Wen's vehicle had pressed into the ground. As far as I could tell, no one else had ever passed this way. The population of the Moon had just reached twenty million in those days. Most lunarians still lived in six cities.

Like Casanova, I usually respond to faces. This time it had been the movements of Malita's hands that had caught my eye. I hadn't known she was Malita Trevari Divora when I had glanced across that restaurant and seen her relaying some bit of gossip to her friends. I just knew I had never seen hands that moved with that much animation and intelligence.

It had been forty years since Malita had created the saga of the Six. It had been thirty-five years since her husband had died. She was striking at me with such force, I suspected, precisely because she associated me with the same attitudes that had led Pin Divora to his death. She had spent the first ten years of her adult life under the spell of a man who believed he should surrender to every impulse without reservation. How could she lower her defenses for a man who was willing to sacrifice almost anything merely because a particular woman had temporarily activated his emotional programming?

If you download Malita's original version of *Six* today, it looks crude by contemporary standards. The imaging techniques seem primitive. The characterization programs seem skimpy and over-consistent. *Six* captured the imagination of a huge public primarily because Malita had zeroed in on the moral implications of personality modification at a time when people were just becoming aware that another new technology was about to disrupt their lives. The work she had put on the market since then had been less successful commercially. You couldn't view it, however, without realizing it had been fabricated by a personality that had emerged from a turbulent youth with its buoyant, probing rationality still intact.

I could have told Shezuko I had known hundreds of women in my life and I had never met anyone as alive as Malita seemed to be. I could have told her that the young woman who had eyed me on the observation deck had been a more exciting physical specimen than Malita, but nothing in her face had communicated the sensitivity and *wisdom* I saw in the looks Malita bestowed on the people who attracted her attention. And even as I talked, I would have wondered if I would have seen any of that sensitivity and wisdom if my mother's body had washed another combination of chemicals across my brain cells when I had been developing in her womb.

Is there any difference between a personality shaped by chance and a personality shaped by conscious choice? Is one more "real" than the other?

Instead, I changed the subject by showing Shezuko how some of the terrain we passed looked to an experienced climber. One of the pleasanter adventures of my life had been a season with a woman who was a specialist in implanted skill systems. She had acquired a passion for climbing but she had never enhanced her own climbing skills. I had thought I would have to buy a climbing implant when I had fallen in love with her, but it hadn't been necessary. She had responded as soon as she saw how I felt and she had enjoyed teaching me the rudiments of her avocation. We had spent almost three months together and she had taught me some of the fine points of the tradeoffs you should take into account when you consider an enhancement. My musical implant, for example, affects the fine motor activity in my left hand and the large muscles in my bow arm. The muscles would adjust if I acquired an implant that turned me into a boxer, but I probably couldn't pursue music and boxing at the same time.

* * *

Razagella had concealed his refuge in the rim of a nameless crater that was approximately three kilometers in diameter. A secondary meteor strike had opened a narrow gap in one section of the rim wall. To enter the crater, you had to work your way through a boulder field while you watched for treacherous dips in the surface level.

We stopped about a kilometer from the squat little door that Razagella had installed in one of the more rugged areas of the rim wall. The dust cloud that surrounded our vehicle floated to the ground. I peered though the window and picked out the tracks that passed us on our left and terminated at the door.

Razagella had burrowed into the side of the wall at a point where it was almost vertical. On the right, about two hundred meters from the door, a big freight hauler had been parked under an overhang. There were no markings on the side of the box.

Shezuko pointed toward a spot somewhere on my left. "It looks like Wen and your current model of female perfection aren't the only people making a visit."

"What makes you think that?"

"Follow the hauler's tracks. They don't go anywhere near the door and they cross Wen's tracks right over there. It looks to me like the hauler made its tracks after Wen drove up to the door. It could be the hauler Razagella used when he moved here, but I don't think he's the kind who'd leave a tell tale like that lying around."

I nodded. I'm no expert on reading tracks, but the hauler had obviously pressed across Wen's tracks after his tractor had approached the cliff. I was also aware that the garage on the other side of the door already housed the only vehicle Razagella had used when he had decided to abandon civilization. Chindraka had thoughtfully furnished me with a detailed diagram of Razagella's layout "just in case you happen to get inside."

I pulled out my notescreen and started writing a description of the situation. "I've got some friends in an office in Eratosthenes," I said. "Maybe they can tell us something about the hauler."

Shezuko stared at me. I had sounded too nonchalant, of course.

"Without any markings to go on?" Shezuko said. "Those must be some friends."

Chindraka responded in text—as I'd requested—several long minutes after I'd transmitted my message. Her employers had apparently added surveillance capabilities to the international communication satellites that orbited the Moon. Once she knew a particular vehicle might be of interest, she could order a search of the recordings collected during the last hundred hours.

The hauler had been backtracked across the wilderness we had just crossed. It had started its journey in Copernicus—a fact that was so interesting she could offer me a substantial bonus if I talked my way into Razagella's bunker and told her who his unknown visitors were.

It wasn't hard to follow her thinking. Wen might be a minor member of his legislature but he had important connections. He would be a perfect go-between if the ruling faction in Eratosthenes wanted to arrange a private conference with the families that dominated the Copernican industrial complex.

It was a tempting proposal but I'm proud to say I rejected the idea as soon as I saw it. If Wen was arranging some kind of political deal, that was his business. The woman on the other side of Razagella's door was—at that moment anyway—the most talented and accomplished woman who had ever enthralled me. If I accepted Chindraka's offer, I would know, beyond a doubt, that I would never spend a happy moment with her.

Hai pinged us just as I was reaching for the tractor's control interface. He nodded knowingly as soon as he popped onto the screen and saw me looking back at him.

"I see you decided to visit us, Joe."

"I'm afraid I yielded to an impulse."

"Would you like to join our party? Wen is interviewing Dr. Razagella right now, but he and Malita both said I should tell you they'd love to see you."

It was an ironic situation. Wen, Malita, and Razagella were, in fact, already prisoners. Hai would have been better off if I had carried out my intent and driven over the horizon. Instead, he had immediately decided I was going to hang around Razagella's doorstep and make a nuisance of myself. Like most men who are fascinated by politics, Hai didn't understand people who pursue pleasure and emotional adventure.

"Malita's been talking about you ever since we left the cruiser," Hai said. "Personally, I think she's beginning to feel guilty about the way we left you behind like that."

There used to be a saying to the effect that all the world loves a lover. It would be more accurate to say most people think my kind of feelings are a subject of comedy. The dry, mocking tone that colored Hai's words had followed me around since I was a teenager. It didn't occur to me he was lying. I didn't realize there was anything wrong until we climbed out of our tractor inside the garage and Hai ushered us into Razagella's living quarters.

Malita, Wen, and Razagella were sitting on a low, unpadded bench that Razagella had roughed out of a rock. The young woman who had eyed me in the cruiser was leaning against a wall. She was watching the couch with a small, unfriendly smile playing across her face.

The door clicked shut behind us. "I have two pieces of information," Hai said. "First—don't try to activate your emergency implants. This instrument I'm holding in my hand can transform the message into useless nonsense at any range up to a hundred meters. It also transmits a signal that can transform the attempt to send an emergency call into a painful experience. Wen has already found that out. Second—don't be misled by the fact that we aren't carrying weapons. Denko can handle all five of you barehanded. Our simulations indicate it would take her about three minutes to kill every one of you, assuming you made the best use of the best combat skills you are known to possess."

Wen was glaring at him defiantly. His hands were shoved inside the pockets of his jacket and he was bending forward as if he was pressing his forehead against an invisible spring. Malita looked like a queen. Her back was as straight as a laser beam, but there was nothing rigid about the lines of her body. She could have been sitting on the observation deck of the cruiser, hands folded in her lap, calmly observing the landscape.

Razagella was staring at the floor. Fifteen years ago Hai would have been forced to keep him in chains. Now he was utterly defenseless. He had removed all his combat enhancements and he had deliberately avoided exercise and let his natural strength atrophy.

It was the first time I had ever seen Razagella. Like everyone else who had ever met him, I was surprised to discover he looked so commonplace.

It made sense when you thought about it, of course. He had evaded the manhunters on Hochheim precisely because he possessed the best safeguard an undercover agent could own—the ability to fade into a crowd. The glamour that surrounded his name had been bestowed on him after the Kumari *raja* had decided it might be best, after all, if it yielded to his demands and gave up its attempt to dominate the wealthiest city in Earth orbit.

The walls of the room were painted off white. The only decoration was a small wall-mounted video. Razagella had spent the last ten years of his life working in a Copernican charity hospital that offered help to people like Hai's mother. Apparently that hadn't been good enough. He was still trying to appease the part of his conscience that objected to the things he had done on Hochheim.

"I'm sorry to inform you my friend Hai has betrayed his trust," Wen said. "He's apparently made a lucrative deal with one of the great humanitarian families that run Copernicus. According to what he's told me, the hauler outside contains a complete personality modification facility and two accredited technicians. Sometime during the next two days, I'm supposed to become a secret traitor, too."

Malita was regarding me with a look that was so hostile it provoked a rush of emotion that took me by surprise. Even then, when I was still adjusting to the discovery I had stepped into a very dangerous situation, she could make me feel that her approval was the only thing in the universe that mattered.

"I told Hai that couldn't possibly be you in that vehicle," Malita said.

Hai smiled. "Apparently she didn't understand you as well as I did."

Hai was more of a political theorist than I had realized. By the time we had been standing there five minutes, I had heard most of the details of his scheme and managed to fill in two thirds of the blanks he left empty. Wen was an ideal choice for the kind of modification the Copernicans had in mind. Most of the important details of Wen's private life were part of the public record. Any competent expert in modification procedures could have guessed his whole life had been shaped by a childhood in which he had been neglected by a glamorous mother who maintained her contacts with the wealthy and powerful by engaging in a series of sexual involvements. Wen's glare became angrier and angrier as Hai talked, but we all knew Hai was explicating the obvious. The technicians in the hauler would have no problem developing an approach that would give them the kind of control they wanted. It's my understanding, for example, that they could have linked Wen's anger at his mother with a female controller who would have functioned as a rival-avenger.

But there was no question the procedure would take the full two days Hai had allotted. That kind of modification would normally take weeks if the technicians were working with an involuntary subject whose personal history was less accessible. Hai had dragged me inside because he couldn't let a bumptious intruder set him back two hours. If Wen and Malita spent more than fifty or sixty hours with Razagella, someone might become suspicious.

"He's already told us what he's going to do to the rest of us," Malita said. "We're all going to leave here with pleasant, innocuous memories—the kind no one would ever think of questioning."

Hai smiled. "Perhaps we'll give Joe the memory he most wants. We could even give it to you, too, Malita. That would solve both your problems, wouldn't it? He'd have what he wants. And you wouldn't have to listen to him scraping that violin every time you think you're going to enjoy a little peace."

I turned around and stared up at him. I could have broken his arms merely by squeezing them with my hands.

The woman, Denko, rested her fingers on my shoulder. She had slipped away from the wall the moment I had started to turn.

Was I angry at Hai because he had suggested that the memory of a single act could satisfy the kind of profound, complex emotional hungers a woman like Malita could arouse? Or was I ready to choke the life out of him because he had ridiculed an art that may be the primary evidence our species deserves to survive?

"Remind me to buy you an enhancement for your hearing," I said. "I'm afraid they don't sell enhancements for the soul."

Denko's fingers slid toward my neck. I turned around, maintaining my dignity, and found Shezuko smiling at me.

"I regret to say I feel forced to disagree with you," Shezuko said. "The enhancement you're referring to is called music."

Wen and Simon Razagella were both staring at us. We were babbling, of course. But it was the kind of babbling that would impress a romantic like Wen. It probably impressed Razagella more than he would have admitted. In spite of all his claims that he wanted to live a life of harmless isolation, some part of Razagella's psyche still responded to displays of gallantry and bravado. He hadn't completely eliminated the young man who had dreamed of doing great deeds.

He was still trying, of course. The small video on the wall had flickered once every thirty seconds since we had entered the room. Now, when it flickered again, I finally realized what it was. Razagella was displaying—one frame at a time—the complete record of the riot that had taken place when he had shut down the programs that controlled the life support system in the Hotel von Braun.

Malita shook her head. "It's too bad Joe didn't become fixated on you, Shezu. You make a better couple than he and I ever would."

"I don't think the quality of the pairing is Joe's primary consideration," Wen said. "As I understand it, Joe has chosen to follow a particular impulse wherever it leads him—in the belief the rewards are worth almost any sacrifice. He feels a passion for a particular individual adds a priceless quality to a relationship with a member of the opposite sex. The things he does with the object of his desire may not be very different from the things he might do with someone else, but they *feel* different because of the emotions she has aroused. Is that a fair summary of your attitudes, Joe?"

"It's almost a direct quote. I didn't realize you understood me so well."

Razagella was smiling. It was a thin smile but he was clearly enjoying our attempts at insouciance.

"I find it intriguing that Joe's dominant passion has been paired with a subordinate passion for music," Razagella said. "Isn't there a tradition that the male courts the female with displays of singing and dancing?"

"It's an interesting notion," Hai said. "You'll have to discuss it without my former employer's contributions. Denko will escort you to the hauler, Wen. I know she's unarmed. I know you've realized she's operating with a handicap, since we can't damage you physically. It would still be best if you followed her instructions."

Denko had returned to her position against the wall. From the neck down, she looked relaxed and almost languid. From the neck up, she was a wary, wide-eyed predator whose brain was registering every move we made.

"Just stand up and start down the hall," Hai said. "She'll fall in behind and tell you where to go next."

Wen stood up but there was nothing compliant about the way he moved. It's hard to communicate contempt when you have to look up at someone, but he managed to do it. He was one of those people, I think, who have never admitted anything can defeat them.

He had some feeling for tactics, too. He didn't go on the offensive until he was only two steps from Hai.

Hai managed to evade both of Wen's kicks but that was the best he could do. With his physique, he couldn't block or counterattack without hurting himself. Denko had glided toward Wen as soon as he had deviated from a plain walk but another factor came into play before she could reach him. Razagella had grabbed a small bag Malita had laid on the floor—it was the only loose object in the room—and tossed it at Denko's legs. Then he flowed out of his chair and launched himself at her waist with the practiced skill of someone who had spent his whole life in low gravity environments. He had removed his enhancements but his body still remembered a few things.

The sight that truly thrilled me—the image that still stops my heart when I think of it—was the way Malita followed him across the room. This was the first time in her entire life that she had engaged in a real act of violence. The only martial art she had ever studied had been a simplified form of aikido—a tradition that tends to attract people who want to nullify attacks without inflicting serious damage on their adversaries. Yet, when the hour came, she didn't hesitate. Underneath her pose of contemptuous indifference, she was burning with outrage.

A small alteration of your memory may seem like a minor matter. Malita still thought of herself as an artist. Memory and personality were the primary source of the unique qualities that gave her work its value.

Shezuko joined the melee as soon as she saw the other three were making a serious effort. Hai's analysis had been a precise forecast of the future. Denko could have killed all four of them in three minutes. She was hampered, however, by the need to keep them alive and unharmed. In forty-eight hours, we were all supposed to leave Razagella's hideaway in a state that would arouse no comment from anyone.

I hadn't memorized the plan Chindraka had transmitted, but I did remember one fact. Thirty meters from the room I was standing in, at the end of a short tunnel, there was an emergency airlock. Razagella might be semi-suicidal, but he hadn't overlooked one of the elementary precautions of lunar living.

I turned away from the action just as Denko landed a kick that made Shezuko double over in agony. I had been living on the Moon for almost two years but I still hadn't acquired all the automatic responses I needed. I took three stumbling, Earth-type steps before I remembered where I was and switched to a clumsy version of the long, land-on-your-toes strides that are the lunar equivalent of running. Hai yelled at me as I reached the airlock and I looked back and saw him flying toward me.

He didn't try to follow me inside the airlock after I closed the hatch behind me. Instead, he stared at me through the window as he unfolded a telescoping electrical shock stick.

"You're being stupid," Hai said. "You're the one person in this group we can afford to kill. Nobody will ask a single question if you happen to have an accident."

I waited for him to come in but he had apparently decided it would be too risky, even with the stick in his hand. I turned my attention to the emergency suits stored on the wall and we eyed each other as I prepared myself for the moment when the outer hatch would swing open.

The emergency suits were simple skin tights but you would have known they were top quality even if you hadn't recognized the trademark printed on the hangers. The one I chose went on as if it had been designed by the best tailor I had ever commissioned. The interface utilized the unmistakable voice of one of my favorite actresses—an impeccably patrician woman who offered me reassuring bits of data as she talked me through the donning procedure. The recycling system would keep me alive for three hours and twenty-two minutes, I was advised. The repair system could mend 107 centimeters of gashes and rips—eleven centimeters more than the industry standard.

It took me ninety-one seconds to finish donning, according to the time strip over the hanger. Then I opened the outer hatch and stepped onto the Topside of Luna for the first time since I had left Earth.

The emergency implants we use today are probably ten times stronger than the implants we used then. Hai had said his jammer could block out the signal as long as we were located within a hundred meters of it, and I had no trouble believing him. Even if I managed to transmit a clear, unspoiled signal, the nearest receiving station would probably receive a weak blip. My secret weapon was my relationship with Chindraka. If she was doing her job as well as she seemed to be doing it, the rescue system would have been advised it should give her a ping the moment it received a call from the precious, infinitely valuable body of her devoted agent, Joseph Louis Baske.

There was a small boulder field off to the right. It looked to me like the closest rock in the group was located at least a hundred and twenty meters from the wall of the crater. I might be out of Hai's range before I reached it, but I wasn't going to take the chance. No one had contradicted Hai when he had claimed his device could transform an emergency signal into a burst of pain.

It was the first time I had made any serious attempt to run while I was wearing a skin tight. I was so engrossed in the effort I didn't realize I was already in trouble. Hai had alerted the people in the hauler. The cab had detached itself from the box while I was still inside the airlock.

If I ever find myself involved in a war, I hope I can arrange things so I can fight on a world that has equipped itself with an atmosphere. The worst thing about the whole situation was the fact that I couldn't hear anything. I wouldn't have known the cab was coming after me, in fact, if Hai hadn't decided to transmit a few words over the intersuit radio.

"The driver of the cab has one of these magic wands, too, Joe. He's over on your left and it looks to me like he's going to have you in range well before you get a hundred meters from me. The pain hits you with a real jolt. Wen dropped to his knees as soon as it cut in."

I couldn't look over my shoulder without running the risk I might fall. I didn't see the cab until I bumbled into the boulder field and positioned myself in the middle of three rocks that were all about Hai's height.

The cab had already moved into range. It couldn't enter the boulder field but it didn't have to. The field was so small an experienced moonhiker could have crossed it in three long strides. If I tried to run into the open, the driver could just circle the rocks and stay near me.

I am not a physically courageous person. I have, however, developed some of the responses a human male with my tendencies needs to acquire. My legs started moving before my brain had realized it had made a decision. Once again, I found myself traveling through a silent world in which all the important facts were hidden from my senses.

I had veered away from the boulder field at an angle that made it look like I was trying to run out of the crater. I didn't start running toward the crater wall until I reached a place where the ground was covered with treacherous looking pits. Then I twisted sharply to the right, as if I had just seen the pits and decided to avoid them.

It was one of those times when you have to ignore the inner voice that's advising you you're doing something incredibly stupid. My only justification for heading for the rim wall was its height. The summit was a good hundred and fifty meters above me at this point. If Hai had been telling the truth, a hundred meters *up* should be just as good as a hundred meters on the horizontal.

I had climbed a few rock formations without ropes or special equipment on Earth, but I had done it in the company of an experienced woman who had picked a viable route before we started out. All I knew at that moment was the general layout of the lowest section of the wall directly in front of me. I would have to start the climb by working my way up a vertical cliff face that ended about fifteen meters above my eye level. Above that, there was a short slope that looked like it could be covered on all fours, if you were careful. After that, I would just have to hope I could pick my way upward.

I grew up on a planet that has been carved by wind and water. To an eye trained in that kind of environment, a landscape shaped by meteor impacts seems as patternless as a sandbox kicked by an angry child. As far as I was concerned, the crater wall was a jumble of bumpy surfaces, randomly located rocks, chaotically placed outcroppings, and slopes that alternated between the suicidal and the just-negotiable without any discernible reason why they should be either one.

I crept up the initial vertical by feeling my way along one handhold or toehold at a time, the same way I would have climbed a similar face on Earth. The low lunar gravity gave me a small advantage but the days when I could play Super-Hero Earth Man had ended months ago. I had been on the Moon almost two years. My muscles had responded in the customary manner.

Hai came back on the intersuit system when I was pressed against the face of the wall about three good holds from the top of the vertical. "There are missile weapons in the cab, Joe. We're not interested in killing you if we don't have to, but no one will have any trouble believing you fell. It's exactly the kind of accident that happens to someone who's spent his life trying to impress women."

The cab had parked at the foot of the wall, where I could give it a few panicky glances as I tried to concentrate on the lumps and indentations that had become my chief interest in life. No one stepped onto the surface while I struggled up the rest of the vertical. The people in the hauler were supposed to be technicians, not killers. If they wanted to threaten me with artillery, they could take it out and let me see it.

I bit back the impulse to tell him that. If silence could unnerve me, maybe it could unnerve Hai, too.

I started crawling up the first incline and the suit warned me it had repaired a small rip before I had covered a full meter. The inclines looked safer than the verticals, but they were treacherous. The "soil" of Topside is a gritty, lumpy blanket of dust and rubble that has been pounded by big meteor strikes and ground by the millions of microscopic particles that fall on every square meter of the Moon as the eons go by. The dust created a slippery surface that had to be treated with caution. The grit contained needles that could cut through the suit if they encountered it at the right angle. If I reached for a protruding bit of rock to steady myself, I had to wiggle it before I put my weight on it. Half the rocks I tested pulled free of the blanket at the first jiggle.

By the time I reached the top of the incline, the suit had given me at least four warnings. "You have 96 centimeters of repairs left," the famous voice said. "You seem to be engaging in a hazardous form of behavior. I must advise you that Keradino Luna cannot assume legal responsibility if you persist in your present pattern. The suit you are wearing is designed to provide you with minimal support while you await rescue. The warranty cannot cover sustained high levels of activity."

I paused at the bottom of another vertical and looked over the ground below me before I planned my next moves. Hai's friends were still sitting in the cab but I lost interest in their activities as soon as my peripheral vision jerked my attention toward the area around Razagella's emergency airlock. Denko was flowing across the landscape as if she was made out of whipped cream.

It seems strange, nowadays, that I hadn't realized what she was as soon as I saw her. It's hard to believe there was a time, only a few decades ago, when people like her were a novelty. We all knew it was possible to design a human being gene by gene. It was obvious oligarchs like the Copernican families had the resources to provide themselves with bodyguards, servants, sex partners, and any other kind of customized specialists they thought they needed. We just hadn't gotten used to the idea that some of them were actually doing it.

She stopped when she reached the foot of the wall and Hai gave me another speech. "Keep your eyes on the tableau below you, Joe. In a moment, you'll see the cab making its departure. In a few minutes, it will be outside the crater. Don't assume you can slip over the top of the rim and dash down the outside slope. By the time you get to the top of the rim, the cab will be placed where it can move along the outside slope and stay with you if you try to leave us that way. I'm afraid you're caught in a pincer. If you stay on this side of the wall—Denko doesn't even have to climb all the way up. She just has to get high enough to maintain the appropriate distance."

If I had been a true hero of derring-do, I wouldn't have hesitated for a moment. But that brought me to a temporary halt. I had, in fact, been hoping I could go over the top of the rim and take advantage of the peculiarities of the lunar landscape. The outside of most lunar crater walls is a long gentle slope, like a giant dune. If I made it to the top, I could hurry down the other side while Denko was still working her way up the inside.

A lunar vehicle, on the other hand, could climb halfway up the outside slope. I would have gone to all this trouble for nothing.

The cab backed away from the wall, as promised, but Denko stayed where she was when I returned to my labors. She didn't start climbing, in fact, until I was halfway up the second vertical. I had been assuming she was an expert in anything that involved physical skill. I began to feel a glimmer of hope when I looked down and discovered she seemed to be proceeding gracefully but slowly—like an inexperienced climber with a huge natural talent. Was it possible Hai's superwoman hadn't received any training in the alpine arts? Had they assumed she would just be a mayhem expert who operated under Topside?

I looked ahead of me and began to plan a route that would edge me to the left as I climbed. As Hai had noted, Denko didn't have to pursue me all the way to the summit. If she stopped when she was only fifty meters above the bottom of the wall, she would still have me in range when I reached the top. If I could put some horizontal distance between us too, on the other hand, I could still create a hundred meter gap.

I had one big advantage over her. I was used to reading cliff faces and working out routes. She was mostly following my route—and doing it with sensible caution.

The moment of decision came when I was still about fifteen meters below the summit. I had just reached the bottom of the last vertical. Denko was inching her way along a face I had negotiated a few minutes earlier. The distance between us was about ninety meters—perhaps ninety-five. It was obvious the gap was as big as it was going to get.

Hai had said a hundred meters. Wasn't it possible he had exaggerated the range when he had talked to us? Hadn't he proved he thought lying was a legitimate tactic?

I found two well braced rocks and held on. The verbal trigger I had chosen for my emergency implant was easy to remember. It was the name, pronounced backward, of the girl who had first activated another response when I had been seven.

The pain tore a scream out of me as soon as I finished the last syllable. My legs thrashed against the lunar surface. The voice of the famous actress advised me I had destroyed another ten centimeters of valuable material and now had only forty centimeters in reserve.

As all military experts know, a well timed diversion can be just as valuable as more heroic maneuvers (and I will let you imagine how I acquired my insight into military matters). Hai had been forced to take Denko's place when he had decided she had to pursue me up the rim wall. He couldn't leave his prisoners alone in the room that contained Razagella's primary communications setup.

Malita had been the only prisoner still standing up when Hai had entered the room with his shock stick. Shezu had been lying on the floor, curled around the stomach blow she had received just before I started running. Wen and Razagella had both been unconscious and Denko had bound them with their own clothes for good measure. Malita had been cowering in a corner with her arms dangling humbly by her sides and she had stayed there while Hai exchanged messages with Denko. She didn't break from her corner until she knew I had failed.

It should have been an uneven contest. Malita had settled for a form of aikido that had been designed for people who were interested in a rudimentary form of self-defense. Hai had studied one of the classic schools of stick fighting and he was armed with a stick that could deliver crippling jolts of pain if it merely brushed his opponent.

For all his cleverness, fortunately, Hai had forgotten the great military axiom called the principle of the objective. He protected himself against threats to his person and forgot Malita was really interested in the jammer clipped to his belt. Once she got that away from him, the flick of a button gave her the only opportunity she needed.

She was a little surprised when the person who responded to her emergency signal was an obscure international bureaucrat named Chindraka Hindaja. I was surprised myself. Chindraka had placed a flag on *any* call for help that came from *anyone* located within fifty kilometers of Razagella's crater.

In spite of all the traditions of romantic fiction, it's been my experience that heroic feats are an overrated form of courtship. There was a brief moment of camaraderie after I staggered into the airlock and we all babbled and clutched while we waited for the rescue party. It took me about five minutes to realize most of the applause was being directed at Malita. Joe, it seemed, had done something he was good at—all that experience at evading irate husbands and lovers really does come in handy, doesn't it? ha, ha—and Malita had done something unexpected and incredibly brave.

"I couldn't believe it when Malita told me what she'd done," Wen said as we stood in front of the airlock window, big grins stretching our faces, and watched Hai and his co-conspirators lumber out of the crater in their hauler. "And I had to be unconscious through the whole thing. She was fighting for our lives three steps from where I was lying and I may as well have been on Earth. And you climbing the rim wall, too. That must have been rough."

Two weeks after I returned from Razagella's hideaway, I turned away from a session with the databanks and realized I had actually pared my modification options to a two-item short list. I could pick the same option Shezuko had chosen, or I could go for a more elaborate procedure that would temper my feelings as soon as I encountered a certain level of resistance. The second approach would require careful, precise, very expensive work. On the other hand, it would obviously be a cost-effective measure over the long term.

It was a shock to realize I had gone that far. This wasn't the first time I had been forced to admit that one of my inamoratas would never smile at me across a dinner table or move inside my arms. It doesn't happen that often, I'm happy to say, but it does happen, and I had learned that my basic nature eventually reasserts itself. In a year—perhaps two, in this case—a face or a flash of hair would attract my attention. I would feel my pulse quickening ever so slightly. Something would stir under the huge black weight that had been pressing on my emotions.

It had always worked that way in the past, anyway. This time I had been catapulted back to the state I had been in when I first arrived on the Moon. There were moments when I stopped dead in the middle of my apartment and cringed as I relived the pain and terror that had followed my attempt to use my emergency implant.

I might have taken some comfort, I suppose, from the thought that the whole episode proves that personalities with my sexual orientation have some social value. If I hadn't been hanging around the edges of Wen Kang's life, the pleasantest city on the Moon would have become the victim of a major political conspiracy.

My achievement was, of course, even grander than I realized. If I had been endowed with a different personality structure, the citizens of Wen's city couldn't have turned to a leader who could rally a stubborn, pugnacious resistance when the Copernican oligarchs attempted to annex Eratosthenes in 2108. Wen would have been an agent of the Copernicans instead.

I didn't know Wen's ultimate destiny at the time, however, and I'm not sure it would have made any difference if I had. The political affairs of mankind were not my primary interest.

Casanova was seventy-three when he died—and he had spent the last fourteen years of his life in semi-retirement, composing his memoirs and earning a stipend as a duke's librarian. I was seventy-four. Would Casanova have chosen more decades of turbulence if they had been offered to him? Was there, after all, a limit to the human organism's capacity for adventure?

Step into the shop. Trim a little here. Add something there. How many pleasures can you enjoy when you're dead?

I responded with some suspicion, naturally, when my apartment advised me I had a call from a woman who had nearly killed me.

She was, as you might expect, a very straightforward person. "I've been given a tenday off," she said, after I offered her a carefully neutral greeting. "I'm calling to see if you'd like to have dinner with me. This evening. If you can."

I've spent a big part of my life watching for certain signs. In her case, they were written all over her—in the way she bent toward the camera, in the lines of her face, in the way her clothes looked like they had been selected with too much thought and arranged with too much care. My intrepid exploit might not have impressed the sorceress who controlled my emotional state, but it had apparently affected *someone.*

It wasn't the first time a woman had developed a passion for the rather unremarkable combination of physical traits and personal quirks that I bear around with me. Usually I try to accommodate them. I've been in the other position so many times I would be a monster if I didn't have some sympathy for their plight.

With Denko, obviously, there were other considerations that had to be taken into account. "As I remember it," I said, "the last time I saw you, you were deliberately doing things that could have truncated my life-span."

She shrugged—more nervously (even shyly) than she might have under other circumstances. "It was just business. It was one of the last things I wanted to do, Mr. Baske . . . Joe."

"But you didn't have any choice, I gather?"

"There are some things I have to do. Just like you do some things."

"And now I'm supposed to assume you just want to see me for the pleasure of it? You don't have to do something you aren't mentioning?"

"I talked to . . . the person I report to . . . before I left. She said to tell you there's no problems. They know you're not a meddler. She said to tell you that anyone who understands you would have known Hai should have let you leave the crater. Instead of thinking he had to invite you inside."

"She sounds like a very perceptive woman."

"She is! She told me I could come here if I wanted to but I should understand you might not be interested. She said I should understand you're basically interested in the way women make *you* feel. Not the way they feel about you."

There was something charmingly naïve about her. She was holding her hands in front of her as if she was pleading with me. Her eyes had a confused, trapped look. I didn't know how old she was, but I was confident she was coping with emotions that had never troubled her before.

"We can meet in the most public place you want," Denko said. "You can take any precautions you want. I can even pay for a complete personal security check. If that's what you want."

It wasn't a totally impossible proposal. This time, after all, we would be meeting in a city, not an isolated wilderness, and we would be surrounded by police officers and handy communications devices. If I arranged for some kind of continuous monitoring of my whereabouts and my vital signs . . .

"You're asking quite a lot, Denko. I'm not a very brave person. You shouldn't judge me by our last interaction. I've just about concluded, in fact, that I may have used up my capacity for taking risks. I nearly died on that rim wall. I know you didn't have any control over your actions, but I've been living for the last two weeks with the knowledge that I couldn't have stopped myself if I had surrendered to the pain burning though my nervous system. I would have slid all the way to the bottom, with grit and rocks tearing at my suit, and probably used up the last centimeters I had left in the repair system. Even if we do meet in a public place—I probably won't want to be alone with you later."

"It can be as public as you want. I understand. My supervisor warned me you might feel that way. She said it's something I'm going to have to learn to live with. It would be nice if you could pick a place where they'll let you play your violin. But that's up to you. It can be any place you want."

I stared at her. It was, in many ways, the most bizarre conversation I've ever participated in.

"You want me to bring my violin?"

She swallowed. The anxiety signs I had picked up before jumped from subtle to outright flashing.

"I saw you play. On the cruiser. With your friend. Shezuko."

I probably wouldn't have understood if I had been thirty years younger. As it was, it took me several seconds to put it together. Then I almost threw my head back and laughed. Even after all these years—after all the times my life has been bedeviled by a smile or the dance of a pair of hands—I could still be surprised when it happened to someone else.

"You don't know what you look like . . . Joe. When you play. I couldn't stop watching you. The second time—I was supposed to be getting ready to leave the cruiser. I watched you right up to the last second I had."

I've experienced fifty more adventures since then (approximately—I don't keep count). Some have been just as gloomy and unrewarding as my encounter with Malita. All have been more stimulating emotionally than the days I spent with Denko. She was a pleasant, sensual woman, as I had thought she would be, but her emotional responses were limited—and she certainly didn't arouse any storms of passion on my side of the relationship. Yet in the end, for all her limitations, it was Denko—not Malita, not any of the others—who lured me away from the temptations of the semi-suicide peddled by the modification establishments. When I think about my time with Denko, I remember two things: the blinding physical climaxes her body could produce and the hours I spent playing for her—just for her, with no other audience.

She was a child of the laboratory. Every aspect of her personality, in theory, had been charted and measured. Her ability to fight and kill on behalf of her creators was supposed to be her only reason for existence. Yet she could sit in my apartment for hours at a time, hypnotized by the way a dedicated dilettante drew complicated patterns of sound from four strings, a bow, and a soundbox.

Over the years I have met a number of musicians who share my fascination with Bach's sonatas for the unaccompanied violin. The sonatas are something of a cult item, in fact. They are thorny, they are difficult, they are incredibly challenging. No one would claim they are a pleasure in any normal sense of the word. Very few people enjoy listening to them. Musicians return to them, over and over, because we have learned that we discover something new every time we explore their complexities. There is no end to their mysteries.

Just as there is no end to the mysteries of the human personality. ●

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Brian Stableford

THE SKIN TRADE

Brian Stableford—whose stunning October 1994 novella, "Les Fleurs du Mal," is currently a finalist for the Hugo award—is very busy reading other people's work. The author is serving as a judge for the John W. Campbell Award for best novel of 1994 and for the 1995 World Fantasy Awards. We hope he finds time between awards to write more of his own high-quality tales.

Illustration by Steve Cavallo

They say that you can't judge a man by the color of his skin, but a good tailor can. A state-of-the-art skin is an adept chameleon, of course, but it can only do so much to cosset and shape and mask its wearer. Nowadays, when *everybody* has a skin of some kind, you never hear people saying "Dead clothes make dead men" any more, but the fact is that a person who's hollow inside can take the luster off the finest skin. A tailor can always see that slight discoloration at a glance, and a good tailor can make a pretty fair diagnosis of the particular kind of soul-sickness involved.

I'm a very good tailor.

There's a saying in the trade that all customers are good and that bad customers are best. It means that if there weren't a steady supply of clients who stubbornly insist on changing their skins at ludicrously frequent intervals, a lot of competent tailors might go bankrupt. That's why tailors are so scrupulously polite to neurotic fashion-victims and so patient with those freaks whose bodily secretions are so prolific or so noxious that even the most avid skin has difficulty turning them to good effect.

I suppose it's true that it'll be a sad day for the business when the presently hectic advancement of skin technology slows down to a mere crawl and the world finally attains the kind of collective sanity that would allow everyone to keep their first post-puberal skin until the day they choose to die. Speaking purely for myself, though, I won't be unhappy to see it. There's something infinitely depressing about constant customers who simply cannot find a skin that suits them, and insist on blaming their tailors for their failure instead of themselves. It's always a bad day for me when someone like Ritchie Halliday walks through the door of my fitting-room.

Ritchie thinks of himself as a very smart person, and, in his way, I suppose he must be. At any rate, he earns a good deal of money—enough to change his skin as often as he likes, for any reason that occurs to him, and always for the most up-to-date model. He likes to boast that no one in the world has greater expertise than he in handling very distant machines on ultra-remote. I believe him, although I'm not as certain as he is that it's a gift and not a flaw in his personality.

"Your average run-of-the-mill Waldo can't adapt his stream of consciousness to deal efficiently with the time-delay involved in being on the moon," he usually tells me, as soon as I begin rubbing him down with the virus-solution that instructs the skin to go into fission-mode. "I'm the only man I know who can lag down for the kind of meld you need to worm around in the Trojans, get in the groove, and stay there for as long as it takes. When we start in on the Jovian satellites, Mr. Invisible Mender, I'll be there, at the cutting edge of human progress."

He has a rich assortment of silly nicknames by which to address me; I think he does it to everybody.

"I suppose you think working my kind of machinery is pretty *boring,*" he often adds, chuckling over the double-meaning, "but believe you me, there's a real art to it—just like there is to your game."

I've always swallowed the implied insult, the way any good tailor would. That's part of his problem; he thinks of each of his skins as just another machine for living in, essentially similar to the metal creepy-crawlies that provide him with other-worldly eyes and other-worldly hands. He can't quite grasp the fact that there's all the difference in the world between skins and cybersuits.

Ritchie parades his ignorance and his misunderstanding every time I peel him, as little bothered by the fact that he's said it all before as by the fact that it's all nonsense. A lot of people talk all the time while their tailors are laying them bare. These days, tailors and parents collecting their newly decanted offspring from the hatchery are the only people who ever get to see the naked flesh of their fellow human beings. Everybody gets embarrassed about being peeled, and many people react to that embarrassment with obsessive garrulity. I suppose people of that kind are preferable to the few who retreat into awful silence, requiring that I should talk incessantly to them, but Ritchie isn't the easiest man to listen to, and he usually doesn't take a blind bit of notice of my replies.

I'd heard Ritchie's spiel so many times before that I was quite astonished the day he suddenly veered away from his usual script and started telling me a *story.* Not unnaturally, he turned the story into a catalogue of complaints about his latest skin, but I didn't mind that at all. What could be more revealing of a man's true self than the complaints he makes against his skin?

"It's a great skin, Old Needleman, from a purely functional point of view. Never a moment's chill, mops up the nasties like a dream. I've never been in better shape, and that sweet tooth of mine has put an unsightly bulge into more than one skin in my time, but this one mops up surplus calories like a hungry rat. I did some bad psychedelics a few weeks back and the skin had me sorted in no time—no hangover at all. The colors are great—dutifully sober by day and a riot of imagination by night. You really have a flair for kaleidoscopics, you know—best in the West, I reckon. As for the gentle caress, well, it's just fine . . . *as far as it goes.* No, that's the wrong way to put it. It might be more realistic to put it the other way around . . . maybe it goes just a little too far. Hell, I'm not explaining this very well, am I? Look, I never thought much about this before, so I'm still trying to figure it out. These things're *alive,* right?"

"Of course they're alive, Mr. Halliday. That's why they're called skins." My tone was as mild as milk, but I have to confess that I was trying to make him feel like a moron. Why not? It was the ninth skin I'd made for him and the ninth he'd thrown back at me. Usually he just said it didn't feel right—or laid some spurious charge against its self-cleaning capacity, or its analgesic facility, or whatever—without feeling the need to offer a fuller explanation. His fumbling inarticulateness seemed to me to be adding insult to injury.

"Yeah, I know. They have a biochemistry and a physiology, or they couldn't do all the kinds of jobs they do. But is a skin only alive the way a house or a chair is alive, or is there something more than that? Is it an *organism?* Has it got a life *of its own?*"

"That's a deep philosophical question, Mr. Halliday," I said, soberly. "A skin isn't capable of living long in isolation from a host, of course, but one could say the same about many natural organisms, from viruses to liver-flukes. A skin is entirely benign—all its biological functions are designed to benefit the wearer, so it's by no means a parasite—but there are some natural species that live in benign association with others."

"Symbiosis, right?" he was quick to put in, to show off the fruits of his research. "You're saying that a man and his skin are symbiotes?"

"Not exactly, Mr. Halliday," I purred, with only the faintest trace of sarcasm. "For the relationship to be symbiotic, the skin would have to benefit too."

"*That's* what I'm trying to get at," he said, triumphantly. "Is the latest generation of skins alive in the sense that they expect to *get* something in exchange for what they do for us? Is it possible that skin-technology has now advanced to the point at which the critters are evolving on their own account and getting ambitious?"

"Skins aren't *sentient,* Mr. Halliday. Lacking minds, they can hardly entertain ambitions. They're actually more like organs than commensal organisms. After all, we call them skins precisely because they bond to the skin that nature gave you, in order to perform all the useful tasks that natural selection didn't equip *that* skin to carry out. They can't reproduce themselves, so they're not subject to any kind of natural selection and they can't evolve the way even synthetic organisms can and do. They're *tailored;* the only purposes they have are those built into them by their designers. Stand up now, please, and remain very still."

"Well, I'm not so sure," he said. "You might think I'm a little bit crazy, Mr. Stitch-in-Time, but I think that skin you're stripping off has ideas of its *own.* I have this definite suspicion that it's not content to confine its medical functions to domestic cleaning and everyday antibiotics. I think it's been interfering with my hormones for reasons of its own."

It was a remarkable allegation, but it was by no means unprecedented. People have always been inclined to deny some of their own emotions, to alienate them as external forces. Since the dawn of consciousness people have been only too ready to deny responsibility with the aid of formulations like "I couldn't help it," "I don't know what came over me," and—

perhaps most revealingly of all—"I fell in love." It's only to be expected that skins would become convenient scapegoats for that kind of moral cowardice.

The skin was gracefully sliding away from Ritchie's upper body, letting his real face and his true colors show through, even in the dim light of the fitting-room. He was stirring a little—fission can be very itchy—but he wasn't imperiling the integrity of the skin. That was one of his few virtues; he might reject a lot of skins, but he always managed to give them back in good condition.

"What makes you think so, Mr. Halliday?" I asked, off-handedly. I was concentrating on the delicate task of gathering the sloughed skin, but not so intently that I couldn't keep track of his unfolding story. I figured that it had to be a case of *cherchez la femme,* and I gave myself a metaphorical pat on the back when he continued.

"I met this girl, see. Not in virtspace or at a metalorgy—on the tram to the Control Tower. I say *met,* but, in the beginning, I just *saw* her. I was on my way to Mars, and I was trying to get into the right frame of mind—I have to do that, you know, it's not just a matter of logging on and logging off—but I just couldn't stop looking at her, and I couldn't figure out *why*. Her face wasn't lit up or anything—she was on her way to work, same as me, so she was masked as Audrey Anon. I mean, there's no rational explanation for it—no reason at all why I should want to look at her. She could've been *anybody* . . . only she wasn't. I didn't get excited, mind. I'm not one of those guys that gets excited *at random*. But there was something drawing me to her like a magnet."

The skin was almost off now; he raised his feet one at a time without being asked.

"She was on the tram again that evening," he went on, "and there again the next day, in the same seat. Obviously a creature of habit, slipping right into a slot even though it was her first week on the route. I got exactly the same feeling . . . couldn't shake it, no matter how hard I tried. Next day, I gave in. As soon as I got on I went and sat down next to her, and introduced myself. I said we obviously lived and worked close by, with exactly the same shift-commitments. She was surprised—which was only to be expected—but there was something else too, right from the beginning."

He remained standing there, shivering slightly. The air was warm and still, but everybody shivers when they're skinless. I gave him a soft sponge to wipe himself down.

"She told me she worked for the 3-V company that owns the studios right across from the Tower," he said, as he ran the sponge over his torso. "She'd been working from home, splicing live and synthetic footage for ads, but she was doing some kind of complex digitization—I don't really understand why—and she felt she needed a supercomp-station with better display facilities than she had in the capstack.

"I could tell right away that she wasn't my type at all. Shy and shallow, locked in real time and local space, straight as straight can be. No money, no class. She wasn't even *physically* my type. I mean, a skin can only do so much in shaping a face and a figure. I like tallish women with curves and style; this one was short and skinny—like if she stood sideways she'd almost disappear—and she acted exactly the way you'd expect a 3-V splicer to act, too *precise* by half, without an ounce of spontaneity—as delicate and tedious as the job. I'm not one of those guys who says as long as the skins are smooth enough you can fuck your granny and enjoy it; I'm really very picky, a bit of a perfectionist . . . as you've probably noticed from the way I keep changing my skin, waiting for the technology to catch up with my standards."

I'd turned away briefly, but now I was returning with a fresh skin limply draped across my arms. It wasn't gossamer-light and he was a big man, but it still weighed less than a medium-sized grapefruit. I began to hang it, very carefully. The texture of his flesh was quite disgusting, but a true professional takes such things in his stride. I made sure I had the skin *just so* before I triggered the melding process that would complete the job.

"And you think that your skin might have had something to do with this . . . unusual attraction?" I said, making every effort to sound like a man trying to be civil in the face of appalling provocation. I had to help the skin a little, teasing it with my fingers. I didn't have to tell him to stand still; he had stopped shivering.

"I *know* it sounds weird," he said. "But when a guy clicks with a girl, these days, it isn't just a matter of him and her, is it? I mean, the contact is skin to skin, and lots of people . . . well, I don't know what people get up to in the privacy of their own virtserts, but according to rumor . . . I mean, nobody really needs a *second* skin nowadays, do they? Some say that actual fucking is really just a hangover from the olden days, when they made babies the hard way—a habit we'd all have shaken off if only we hadn't figured out how to extend the habit of living. . . .

"Well, anyhow, we got together. Not just once, either—and I have to say that I'm normally a once-is-enough kind of guy. I don't get *hung up* the way some guys do. Even when I do take a fancy, it usually wears off after a couple of scrimmages. A long-term relationship with an asteroid-miner is one thing, because you can really get *inside* a gimmick like that, but getting together with a *person* is just *friction,* you know . . . well, maybe you don't see it that way, being a tailor, but for a guy like me . . .

"I don't say that I didn't have fun with the girl, because I did, and so did she . . . but after a little while, I got the distinct impression that my *skin* was having more fun than *I* was. Does that make any sense?"

It isn't polite to say *no* to a question like that. Cold denial is a form of brutality. What I actually said was: "A skin has no sensations of its own, Mr. Halliday. It only has nerve-*endings* that link up to yours, becoming extensions of your own sensory apparatus. Although it can be stripped away, a skin really is part of *you.* In fact, it's more intimately a part of you than many of the organs rough-hewn for you by nature. In the old days, when people wore dead clothes, the outermost layer of their skin was also dead, the underlying flesh being in a constant state of self-renewal; tailored skins aren't subject to that necessity. For the first time in human history, people are wholly and truly *alive,* thanks to tailor-made skin. Your skin removes malign chemicals from your blood and pumps benign ones in, so it does help to regulate the balance of your hormones, but there's no sense in which it can be said to be separate from you, let alone *controlling* you."

"I know you're right," he said, implying by his tone that he knew no such thing. "After all, you're the tailor—I'm just the dummy. But I just couldn't get it out of my head, you know—the idea that it wasn't me and her so much as *my skin* and *her skin.* I don't say the damn thing was thinking, or that it had any kind of *desire* . . . nothing that complicated. It was just that the whole business seemed so peculiar. It really was as if my skin were being drawn to hers no matter what either of us might have had to say about it if we'd been able to look at it dispassionately. When we got together, at least after the first few times, I began to feel that the whole thing was a little *weird,* maybe even a little *unnatural.* I truly believe that it was an internal difference of opinion between me and my skin. *I* knew there was no future in it, that we had nothing in common, nothing to say to one another, nothing to hold us except the rolling and writhing, but the *skin* . . .

"The simple fact is, Mr. Invisible Mender, that I knew I needed fitting out all over again. I had to get out of that relationship, and I just didn't think I could *do* it while I was wearing that skin. I really felt, deep down, that unless I could get a complete change, I was all dressed up with nowhere to go. Anyhow, I read this article in the *Biotech Bulletin* that says the newest models can work your muscles up to perfect pitch, adding ten kilos and more to the average clean and jerk."

The average jerk, anyway, I thought—but I didn't say anything of the kind. Like any good tailor, I knew a cue for a sales-talk when I heard one, and we all have to make a living. Those of us incapable of magical rapport with the ever-faithful but severely time-lapsed inhabitants of the asteroid belt simply have to hold communion with lesser beings.

"You can move now, Mr. Halliday," I told him. "This is a very good skin—the best there is. It'll do everything the *Biotech Bulletin* says, and more. How does it feel?"

"It feels great," he confirmed, as he went to look at himself in the mirror—the mirror that he'd been studiously ignoring for the past thirty minutes. "This could be the one. This could be the one that's really *me*."

I could see even then that the colors weren't right, but that wasn't the fault of the skin, which was one of my very best. It was the fault of the man inside.

I half-expected Sally to come in within a matter of days, but she didn't. When she didn't appear in six weeks, I even began to wonder whether Ritchie had continued to see her—which would, in a way, have made sense. I even began to wonder whether I ought to feel guilty about it, although I knew it was silly. After all, I knew perfectly well that it was all in Ritchie's mind, and that the skin he'd made a scapegoat had absolutely nothing to do with his peculiar infatuation. In the end, though, the day came when the door opened and in shuffled Sally, in her usual shamefaced fashion.

"I'm terribly sorry about all this," she said, as I started the slow business of persuading the tenacious molecules to let go. "I really am."

"That's all right, Sally," I said, evenly. "Everyone has the right to shop around until she finds a skin that suits her."

She was still lying face down at that point, so I couldn't see her blurry blue eyes. Nor could she see mine.

"It's one thing to find the right skin," she observed, "and quite another to find the *money*. Especially when I know, deep down, that the problem isn't with the skins at all. You're the best tailor in the neighborhood—everybody says so. It's *me* that's all wrong. I don't know why you bother, just because we had a thing once. It was a long time ago. You really don't owe me anything."

She was right; I didn't. But I do take a pride in my work, and I really did want to find a skin that might solve her problems, if they were in fact soluble.

Even before she started to tell me about it, I'd deduced that Ritchie Halliday had run true to form. Once he'd shed the skin he'd fixed the blame on, his head had had no difficulty straightening itself out. Sally had hung on for two months, hoping that he might come round, but, in the end, she'd given up. I didn't know whether to feel glad or sad about that. After all, I'm a tailor, not a matchmaker. There are no matchmakers any more; the world no longer has any need for them.

"I had to use the on-site facilities on a particularly complicated job," she told me, as I gently stood her up so that the flaying process could get under way, "so I started going into the studios. I met this man on the tram. He really wasn't my type—big, brash, plenty of money—but he *was* rather beautiful. I was astonished that he even noticed me. I was in my working drab, face set like porcelain. Heaven alone knows what drew him to me. He was awfully arrogant, always bragging about the slowness of light-speed being no limitation to his efficiency—he operates remotes way out in space from that tower place across the road from the studios—but there was something *cuddly* about him that made me want to wrap myself around him. Normally, as you know, I don't bother much with actual *people*—after all, when you have virtual partners available at the touch of a button, why bother with all the knees and elbows?—but this was different. For the first time, I felt as if I might really be getting *close* to somebody. We had this *rapport* . . . we really *connected*. I know he felt the same way, at least for a while, but there was something in him that kept wanting to pull back. I guess it must give a person a peculiar outlook on life, spending six hours every day way out in the system, where the sun's just another star. A person like him doesn't just *operate* his machines, the way factory-drivers do; he *becomes* the mind of each and every one, like the queen of some strange kind of hive, and it just becomes *normal* to have a reaction time of fifteen or twenty minutes. I don't think, in his heart of hearts, that he ever wanted to come *down to earth*. Does that sound crazy?"

"No," I assured her, as I carefully collected the skin that was falling away from her slender body. "It doesn't sound crazy at all."

"While he was with me," she said, looking down, "I felt completely at home in that skin. For the first time in my life, I thought, *This is what it's supposed to be like. This is what a skin is supposed to feel like.* Maybe that was the problem. Maybe if I'd been able to hold myself back, just a little, I wouldn't have forged such a tight link between that feeling of being comfortable and being with *him*. Because, you see, when he went cold on me, I suddenly didn't feel at ease in the skin any more. The comfort went when he did.

"He wasn't unkind, of course—at least, he didn't *mean* to be. It was just that he broke it off the same way he did everything else, not very gently. He actually got a new apartment, so that he wouldn't have to travel on the same tram any more. Imagine that! Moving expenses are a minor hassle to a man like him; they pay him a *lot* of money to sort out the problems those space-slugs run into if they're left to their own devices for too long. He reckons he'll be the first man on the Jovian moons, you know—maybe the first to go swimming in the Great Red Spot itself. It was understandable, of course. What did he ever see in me in the *first* place? He has lots of rich friends—he knows actresses whose tapes I've spliced and whose images I've souped up by enhanced digitization. I've never even been to a metalorgy. We really didn't have anything in common. It's such a shame that I got to associate feeling at home in my skin with *being with him*. I know it makes no sense, but I just can't shake off the feeling. I just can't go on living in the same skin that he used to fondle, that meant so much to *him* . . . while it lasted. It's as if I can still feel the echo of him while I wear it. Silly, silly, silly."

"You mustn't worry about it," I said, as I gathered up the remnants of the tattered shroud. "If only you didn't take these things so hard, you'd find it much easier to get along with your skins."

It wasn't her fault that there was no hope of recycling the skin as a whole entity; even if she'd stood as still as a statue, it wouldn't have been any use. Its cells would have to be reduced to blastular innocence, returned to the crucible to reproduce and respecialize before being born yet again.

"I know," she said. "I'm an atavism. I don't really belong in the modern world at all. I was made to go naked, or to dress myself in all manner of lifeless paraphernalia."

"That's nonsense," I told her. "You're a citizen of the twenty-second century, just like everyone else, and you have all the time in the world to find a skin that will make an appropriate interface between your inner self and the world at large. With luck, we'll *all* have all the time in the world—even tailors who've grown old waiting for rejuve technology to hit the jackpot. Skintech is making such rapid progress that even people like me, who feel deeply and uniquely attached to skins we put on half a lifetime ago, will have to shed them or be left high and dry by the great tide of human evolution."

"I'm thinking of getting a new job," she said. "It'll mean retraining, but I'm not a *machine*, am I? I can't keep on doing the same old thing forever. My work isn't like tailoring, which is constantly changing . . . the problem with digitizing images is that when you've reduced everything to ones and zeros, there really isn't much further you can go, and splicing real-to-synth is just cut-and-stitch, cut-and-stitch."

It's not as bad as that, Miss Patchwork, I thought—but all I said was: "That's not a bad idea. Change your life along with your skin, and start from scratch. Give yourself the chance to build a coherent whole and it'll all work out. Trust yourself a little. Give your new skin a chance to get comfortable, and maybe you'll be comfortable *inside* it."

I started the hanging. That was always the easy part with Sally. She was strangely unselfconscious about standing naked with her head back and her arms outstretched; she never flinched or shrugged the way some people do.

"It's really not very nice to keep casting them off, is it?" she said, murmuring through tightened lips. "I mean, the ones I bring back have all been brought back before, haven't they? I suppose, with me being so small and thin, they don't get any more chances. They *die,* don't they? And it's not *their* fault, is it? It's *my* fault, for being so bloody difficult."

"They don't die, Sally," I said, soothingly. "They're not *individuals*. The cells are immortal—they simply get recycled into new skins. Everything in the world gets recycled, molecule by molecule and atom by atom. The air we breathe has been breathed since time immemorial by all the human beings who ever set foot upon the earth. The air doesn't care who breathes it in and who breathes it out, and the cells that make up our skins just get on with the *job,* no matter how they're recombined. There's no need to feel bad about bringing your skin back to the tailor's—no need at all."

"You're very kind," she said. "I don't deserve it, but I'm very grateful. You're the best man I know—far better than Ritchie Halliday, no matter how he made me feel."

"I'm just a tailor," I told her. "Fitting people into skins is my job. This one will be just right. Take my word for it."

Sally's new skin suited her. All her skins did, no matter how uncomfortable she felt inside them. I suppose that's a tribute to my cutting and seaming skills—all the more so because it was a recycling job—but it's also testimony to the fact that there was something precious in *her,* whose full value she didn't yet know. Maybe I'm sentimental, but my judgment in such matters has always been sound. I could tell that Sally was authentically beautiful by the way the colors of her skins glowed; in time, I felt sure, she'd come to know it too.

I'm profoundly glad that the olden days are long gone; it must have been a terrible thing to have to rely on *clothes* to create the images by means of which we display ourselves to the world at large. Skins are so much better in every conceivable way, and they're getting better all the time. It isn't their lack of technological sophistication which makes so many people uncomfortable within them. It's *our* lack of *emotional* sophistication that's to blame—but I'm not one of those people who think that we're unready for the authentic immortality that rejuve technology will very soon deliver to those who can afford it. I figure that true sanity will be easy enough to cultivate, once we have all the time we need to do the job.

I'm confident that future generations will be more easily able to reap the full reward of the tailor's art, and I reckon that it mightn't be such a bad thing if a few of my mediocre competitors were to go bankrupt. Of course, it's easy for me to say that; I'm already rich, and I have absolute faith in my own ability.

I expect to hear a hundred more stories like Ritchie's and Sally's before I move on to some other kind of art-work, but there'll come a time when tales of that pathetic kind will be as obsolete as birth and death. One day, everyone will be able to look into a mirror and say "That's really me," and know that it's true—and always will be.

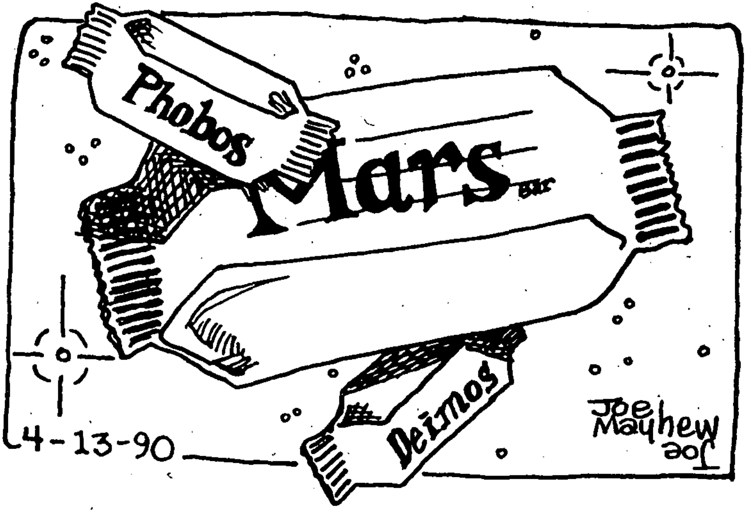
This time around, I gave Sally a skin that had been sloughed by one of the actresses whose tapes she cut and pasted and whose images she patiently repaired with the aid of a fertile stream of dots and dashes. There was no element of strategy in the choice, because I knew full well that it really didn't matter at all where a skin had been before I passed it on to a new owner.

I knew that the answer to Sally's problem, like the answer to Ritchie's, was simply a matter of trial and error, and of having faith in the things that are worthy of our faith. If we all keep going long enough, we'll hit the winning combinations in the end. That's the nature of human evolution—and, indeed of *all* evolution.

Ritchie Halliday's ninth skin had already been re-cut and sold on, of course, but there was no possibility at all of anything strange happening again—if anything strange had happened at all. Personally, I don't think anything had.

I'm just about willing to concede that Ritchie might have been subconsciously drawn to the wearer of his previous skin. There are all kinds of subtle ways in which a second-hand skin might conceivably be recognized, no matter how well it blends with its new owner. What I can't believe is that Sally's decision to go into the studios for a while, on the same tram that Ritchie caught to work every day, could be anything but coincidence. Skins don't have a memory in that sense, and they don't have that kind of control over their wearers.

In any case, it would be absurd to imagine—even for a moment—that one of Ritchie's cast-offs would want to get back together with him, if it were capable of wanting anything at all. ●

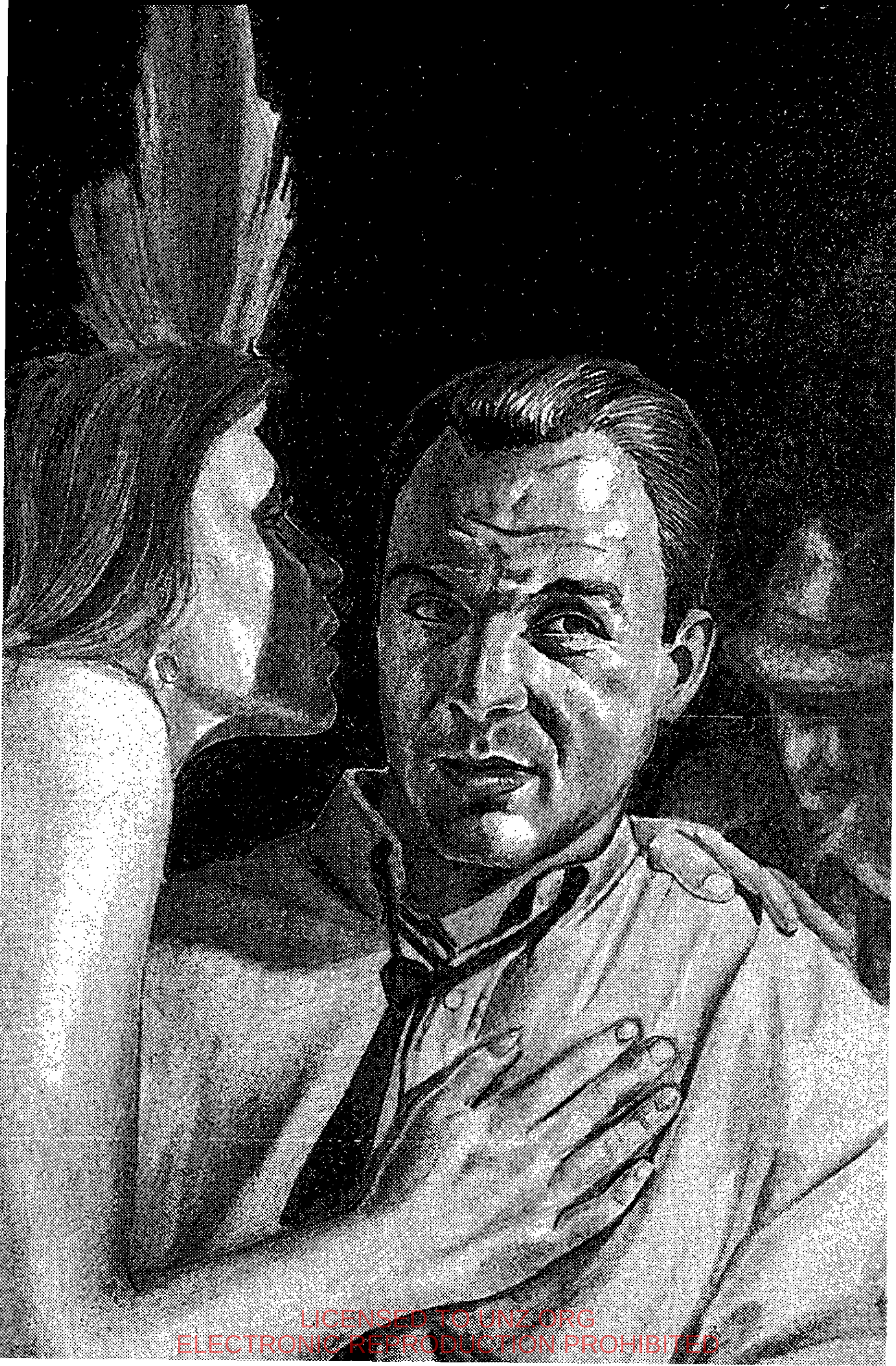


Harry Turtledove

MUST AND SHALL

Hugo-award-winning author, Harry Turtledove, appears in our pages for the first time since "In the Presence of Mine Enemies" (January 1992). Mr. Turtledove's most recent novel, *The Stolen Throne*, is just out from Del Rey. His next book, *Worldwar: Upsetting the Violence*, will be published by Del Rey in February 1995. Next April, Tor Books will release *The Two Georges*, a collaborative novel the author has been working on with actor and fellow history buff, Richard Dreyfuss.

Illustration by Steve Cavallo



12 July 1864—Fort Stevens, north of Washington, D.C.

General Horatio Wright stood up on the earthen parapet to watch the men of the Sixth Corps, hastily recalled from Petersburg, drive Jubal Early's Confederates away from the capital of the United States. Down below the parapet, a tall, thin man in black frock coat and stovepipe hat asked, "How do we fare, General?"

"Splendidly." Wright's voice was full of relief. Had Early chosen to attack the line of forts around Washington the day before, he'd have faced only militiamen and clerks with muskets, and might well have broken through to the city. But Early had been late, and now the veterans from the Sixth Corps were pushing his troopers back. Washington City was surely saved. Perhaps because he was so relieved, Wright said, "Would you care to come up with me and see how we drive them?"

"I should like that very much, thank you," Abraham Lincoln said, and climbed the ladder to stand beside him.

Never in his wildest nightmares had Wright imagined the president accepting. Lincoln had peered over the parapet several times already, and drawn fire from the Confederates. They were surely too far from Fort Stevens to recognize him, but with his height and the hat he made a fine target.

Not far away, a man was wounded and fell back with a cry. General Wright interposed his body between President Lincoln and the Confederates. Lincoln spoiled that by stepping away from him. "Mr. President, I really must insist that you retire to a position of safety," Wright said. "This is no place for you; you must step down at once!"

Lincoln took no notice of him, but continued to watch the fighting north of the fort. A captain behind the parapet, perhaps not recognizing his commander-in-chief, shouted, "Get down, you damn fool, before you get shot!"

When Lincoln did not move, Wright said, "If you do not get down, sir, I shall summon a body of soldiers to remove you by force." He gulped at his own temerity in threatening the President of the United States.

Lincoln seemed more amused than anything else. He started to turn away, to walk back toward the ladder. Instead, after half a step, he crumpled bonelessly. Wright had thought of nightmares before. Now one came to life in front of his horrified eyes. Careless of his own safety, he crouched by the president, whose blood poured from a massive head wound into the muddy dirt atop the parapet. Lincoln's face wore an expression of mild surprise. His chest hitched a couple of times, then was still.

The captain who'd shouted at Lincoln to get down mounted to the parapet. His eyes widened. "Dear God," he groaned. "It is the president."

Wright thought he recognized him. "You're Holmes, aren't you?" he said. Somehow it was comforting to know the man you were addressing when the world seemed to crumble around you.

"Yes, sir, Oliver W. Holmes, 20th Massachusetts," the young captain answered.

"Well, Captain Holmes, fetch a physician here at once," Wright said. Holmes nodded and hurried away. Wright wondered at his industry—surely he could see Lincoln was dead. Who, then, was the more foolish, himself for sending Holmes away, or the captain for going?

21 July 1864—Washington, D.C.

From the hastily erected wooden rostrum on the east portico of the capitol, Hannibal Hamlin stared out at the crowd waiting for him to deliver his inaugural address. The rostrum was draped with black, as was the capitol, as had been the route his carriage took to reach it. Many of the faces in the crowd were still stunned, disbelieving. The United States had never lost a president to a bullet, not in the eighty-eight years since the nation freed itself from British rule.

In the front row of dignitaries, Senator Andrew Johnson of Tennessee glared up at Hamlin. He had displaced the man from Maine on Lincoln's reelection ticket; had this dreadful event taken place a year later (assuming Lincoln's triumph), he now would be president. But no time for might-have-beens.

Hamlin had been polishing his speech since the telegram announcing Lincoln's death reached him up in Bangor, where, feeling useless and rejected, he had withdrawn after failing of renomination for the vice presidency. Now, though, his country needed him once more. He squared his broad shoulders, ready to bear up under the great burden so suddenly thrust upon him.

"Stand fast!" he cried. "That has ever been my watchword, and at no time in all the history of our great and glorious republic has our heeding it been more urgent. Abraham Lincoln's body may lie in the grave, but we shall go marching on—to victory!"

Applause rose from the crowd at the allusion to "John Brown's Body"—and not just from the crowd, but also from the soldiers posted on the roof of the capitol and at intervals around the building to keep the accursed rebels from murdering two presidents, not just one. Hamlin went on, "The responsibility for this great war, in which our leader gave his last full measure of devotion, lies solely at the feet of the Southern slaveocrats who conspired to take their states out of our grand Union for their own evil ends. I promise you, my friends—Abraham Lincoln shall be avenged, and those who caused his death punished in full."

More applause, not least from the Republican senators who proudly called themselves Radical: from Thaddeus Stevens of Pennsylvania, Benjamin Wade of Ohio, Zachariah Chandler of Michigan, and bespectacled John Andrew of Massachusetts. Hamlin had been counted among their number when he sat in the Senate before assuming the duties, such as they were, of the vice president.

"Henceforward," Hamlin declared, "I say this: let us use every means

recognized by the Laws of War which God has put in our hands to crush out the wickedest rebellion the world has ever witnessed. This conflict is become a radical revolution—yes, gentlemen, I openly employ the word, and, what is more, I revel in it—involving the desolation of the South as well as the emancipation of the bondsmen it vilely keeps in chains."

The cheers grew louder still. Lincoln had been more conciliatory, but what had conciliation gotten him? Only a coffin and a funeral and a grieving nation ready, no, eager for harsher measures.

"They have sowed the wind; let them reap the whirlwind. We are in earnest now, and have awakened to the stern duty upon us. Let that duty be disregarded or haltingly or halfway performed, and God only in His wisdom can know what will be the end. This lawless monster of a Political Slave Power shall forevermore be shorn of its power to ruin a government it no longer has the strength to rule.

"The rebels proudly proclaim they have left the Union. Very well: we shall take them at their word and, once having gained the victory Providence will surely grant us, we shall treat their lands as they deserve: not as the states they no longer desire to be, but as conquered provinces, won by our sword. I say we shall hang Jefferson Davis, and hang Robert E. Lee, and hang Joe Johnston, yes, hang them higher than Haman, and the other rebel generals and colonels and governors and members of their false Congress. The living God is merciful, true, but He is also just and vengeful, and we, the people of the United States, we shall be His instrument in advancing the right."

Now great waves of cheering, led by grim Thaddeus Stevens himself, washed over Hamlin. The fierce sound reminded him of wolves baying in the backwoods of Maine. He stood tall atop the rostrum. He would lead these wolves, and with them pull the rebel Confederacy down in ruin.

11 August 1942—New Orleans, Louisiana

Air brakes chuffing, the Illinois Central train pulled to a stop at Union Station on Rampart Street. "New Orleans!" the conductor bawled unnecessarily. "All out for New Orleans!"

Along with the rest of the people in the car, Neil Michaels filed toward the exit. He was a middle-sized man in his late thirties, most of his dark-blond hair covered by a snap-brim fedora. The round, thick, gold-framed spectacles he wore helped give him the mild appearance of an accountant.

As soon as he stepped from the air-conditioned comfort of the railroad car out into the steamy heat of New Orleans summer, those glasses fogged up. Shaking his head in bemusement, Michaels drew a handkerchief from his trouser pocket and wiped away the moisture.

He got his bags and headed for the cab stand, passing on the way a horde of men and boys hawking newspapers and rank upon rank of shoeshine stands. A fat Negro man sat on one of those, gold watch chain running from one pocket of his vest to the other. At his feet, an Irish-looking fellow plied the rag until his customer's black oxfords gleamed.

"There y'are, sir," the shoeshine man said, his half-Brooklyn, half-Southern accent testifying he was a New Orleans native. The Negro looked down at his shoes, nodded, and, with an air of great magnanimity, flipped the shoeshine man a dime. "Oh, thank you very much, sir," the fellow exclaimed. The insincere servility in his voice grated on Michaels' ears.

More paperboys cried their trade outside the station. Michaels bought a *Times-Picayune* to read while he waited in line for a taxi. The war news wasn't good. The Germans were still pushing east in Russia and sinking ship after ship off the American coast. In the South Pacific, Americans and Japanese were slugging away at each other, and God only knew how that would turn out.

Across the street from Union Station, somebody had painted a message: YANKS OUT! Michaels sighed. He'd seen that slogan painted on barns and bridges and embankments ever since his train crossed into Tennessee—and, now that he thought about it, in Kentucky as well, though Kentucky had stayed with the Union during the Great Rebellion.

When he got to the front of the line at the cab stand, a hack man heaved his bags into the trunk of an Oldsmobile and said, "Where to, sir?"

"The New Orleans Hotel, on Canal Street," Michaels answered.

The cabbie touched the brim of his cap. "Yes, sir," he said, his voice suddenly empty. He opened the back door for Michaels, slammed it shut after him, then climbed into the cab himself. It took off with a grinding of gears that said the transmission had seen better days.

On the short ride to the hotel, Michaels counted five more scrawls of YANKS OUT, along with a couple of patches of whitewash that probably masked others. Servicemen on the street walked along in groups of at least four; several corners sported squads of soldiers in full combat gear, including, in one case, a machine-gun nest built of sandbags. "Nice quiet little town," Michaels remarked.

"Isn't it?" the cabbie answered, deadpan. He hesitated, his jaw working as if he were chewing his cud. After a moment, he decided to go on: "Mister, with an accent like yours, you want to be careful where you let people hear it. For a damnyankee, you don't seem like a bad fellow, an' I wouldn't want nothin' to happen to you."

"Thanks. I'll bear that in mind," Michaels said. He wished the Bureau had sent somebody who could put on a convincing drawl. Of course the last man the FBS had sent ended up floating in the Mississippi, so evidently his drawl hadn't been convincing enough.

The cab wheezed to a stop in front of the New Orleans Hotel. "That'll be forty cents, sir," the driver said.

Michaels reached into his trouser pocket, pulled out a half dollar. "Here you go. I don't need any change."

"That's right kind of you, sir, but—you wouldn't happen to have two quarters instead?" the cabbie said. He handed the big silver coin back to his passenger.

"What's wrong with it?" Michaels demanded, though he thought he knew the answer. "It's legal tender of the United States of America."

"Yes, sir, reckon it is, but there's no place hereabouts I'd care to try and spend it even so," the driver answered, "not with *his* picture on it." The obverse of the fifty-cent piece bore an image of the martyred Lincoln, the reverse a Negro with his manacles broken and the legend SIC SEMPER TYRANNIS. Michaels had known it was an unpopular coin with white men in the South, but he hadn't realized how unpopular it was.

He got out of the cab, rummaged in his pocket, and came up with a quarter and a couple of dimes. The cabbie didn't object to Washington's profile, or to that of the god Mercury. He also didn't object to seeing his tip cut in half. That told Michaels all he needed to know about how much the half-dollar was hated.

Lazily spinning ceiling fans inside the hotel lobby stirred the air without doing much to cool it. The colored clerk behind the front desk smiled to hear Michaels' accent. "Yes, sir, we do have your reservation," she said after shuffling through papers. By the way she talked, she'd been educated up in the Loyal States herself. She handed him a brass key. "That's room 429, sir. Three dollars and twenty-five cents a night."

"Very good," Michael said. The clerk clanged the bell on the front desk. A white bellboy in a pillbox hat and uniform that made him look like a Philip Morris advertisement picked up Michaels' bags and carried them to the elevator.

When they got to room 429, Michaels opened the door. The bellboy put down the bags inside the room and stood waiting for his tip. By way of experiment, Michaels gave him the fifty-cent piece the cabbie had rejected. The bellboy took the coin and put it in his pocket. His lips shaped a silent word. Michaels thought it was *damnyankee,* but he wasn't quite sure. He left in a hurry.

A couple of hours later, Michaels went downstairs to supper. Something shiny was lying on the carpet in the hall. He looked down at the half-dollar he'd given the bellboy. It had lain here in plain sight while people walked back and forth; he'd heard them. Nobody had taken it. Thoughtfully, he picked it up and stuck it in his pocket.

A walk through the French Quarter made fears about New Orleans seem foolish. Jazz blasted out of every other doorway. Neon signs pulsed above ginmills. Spasm bands, some white, some Negro, played on street-corners. No one paid attention to blackout regulations—that held true North and South. Clog-dancers shuffled, overturned caps beside them inviting coins. Streetwalkers in tawdry finery swung their hips and flashed knowing smiles.

Neil Michaels moved through the crowds of soldiers and sailors and gawking civilians like a halfback evading tacklers and heading downfield. He glanced at his watch, partly to check the time and partly to make sure nobody had stolen it. Half past eleven. Didn't this place ever slow down? Maybe not.

He turned right off Royal Street onto St. Peter and walked southeast toward the Mississippi and Jackson Square. The din of the Vieux Carré faded behind him. He strode past the Cabildo, the old Spanish building of stuccoed brick that now housed the Louisiana State Museum, including a fine collection of artifacts and documents on the career of the first military governor of New Orleans, Benjamin Butler. Johnny Rebs kept threatening to dynamite the Cabildo, but it hadn't happened yet.

Two great bronze statues dominated Jackson Square. One showed the square's namesake on horseback. The other, even taller, faced that equestrian statue. Michaels thought Ben Butler's bald head and rotund, sagging physique less than ideal for being immortalized in bronze, but no one had asked his opinion.

He strolled down the paved lane in the formal garden toward the statue of Jackson. Lights were dimmer here in the square, but not too dim to keep Michaels from reading the words Butler had had carved into the pedestal of the statue: *The Union Must and Shall Be Preserved,* an adaptation of Jackson's famous toast, "Our Federal Union, it must be preserved."

Michaels' mouth stretched out in a thin hard line that was not a smile. By force and fear, with cannon and noose, bayonet and prison term, the United States Army had preserved the Union. And now, more than three quarters of a century after the collapse of the Great Rebellion, U.S. forces still occupied the states of the rebel Confederacy, still skirmished in hills and forests and sometimes city streets against men who put on gray shirts and yowled like catamounts when they fought. Hatred bred hatred, reprisal bred reprisal, and so it went on and on. He sometimes wondered if the Union wouldn't have done better to let the Johnny Rebs get the hell out, if that was what they'd wanted so badly.

He'd never spoken that thought aloud; it wasn't one he could share. Too late to worry about such things anyhow, generations too late. He had to deal with the consequences of what vengeful Hamlin and his like-minded successors had done.

The man he was supposed to meet would be waiting behind Butler's statue. Michaels was slightly surprised the statue had no guards around it; the Johnny Rebs had blown it up in the 1880s and again in the 1920s.

If New Orleans today was reconciled to rule from Washington, it concealed the fact very well.

Michaels ducked around into the darkness behind the statue. "Fourscore and seven," he whispered, the recognition signal he'd been given.

Someone should have answered, "New birth of freedom." No one said anything. As his eyes adapted to the darkness, he made out a body sprawled in the narrow space between the base of the statue and the shrubbery that bordered Jackson Square. He stooped beside it. If this was the man he was supposed to meet, the fellow would never give him a recognition signal, not till Judgment Day. His throat had been cut.

Running feet on the walkways of the square, flashlight beams probing like spears. One of them found Michaels. He threw up an arm against the blinding glare. A hard Northern voice shouted, "Come out of there right now, you damned murdering Reb, or you'll never get a second chance!"

Michaels raised his hands high in surrender and came out.

Outside Antoine's, the rain came down in buckets. Inside, with oysters Rockefeller and a whiskey and soda in front of him and the prospect of an excellent lunch ahead, Neil Michaels was willing to forgive the weather.

He was less inclined to forgive the soldiers from the night before. Stubbing out his Camel, he said in a low but furious voice, "Those great thundering galoots couldn't have done a better job of blowing my cover if they'd rehearsed for six weeks, God damn them."

His companion, a dark, lanky man named Morrie Harris, sipped his own drink and said, "It may even work out for the best. Anybody the MPs arrest is going to look good to the Johnny Rebs around here." His New York accent seemed less out of place in New Orleans than Michaels' flat, midwestern tones.

Michaels started to answer, then shut up as the waiter came over and asked, "You gentlemen are ready to order?"

"Let me have the *pompano en papillote,"* Harris said. "You can't get it any better than here."

The waiter wrote down the order, looked a question at Michaels. He said, "I'll take the *poulet chanteclair.*" The waited nodded, scribbled, and went away.

Glancing around to make sure no one else was paying undue attention to him or his conversation, Michaels resumed: "Yeah, that may be true now. But Ducange is dead now. What if those stupid dogfaces had busted in on us while we were dickering? That would have queered the deal for sure, and it might have got me shot." As it hadn't the night before, his smile did not reach his eyes. "I'm fond of my neck. It's the only one I've got."

"Even without Ducange, we've still got to get a line on the underground," Harris said. "Those weapons are somewhere. We'd better find 'em before the whole city goes up." He rolled his eyes. "The whole city, hell! If what we've been hearing is true, the Nazis have shipped enough guns and God knows what all else into New Orleans to touch off four or five states. And wouldn't that do wonders for the war effort?" He slapped on irony with a heavy trowel.

"God damn the Germans," Michael said, still quietly but with savage venom. "They played this game during the last war, too. But you're right. If what we've heard is the straight goods, the blowup they have in mind will make the Thanksgiving Revolt look like a kiss on the cheek."

"It shouldn't be this way," Harris said, scowling. "We've got more GIs and swabbies in New Orleans than you can shake a stick at, and none of 'em worth a damn when it comes to tracking this crap down. Nope, for that they need the FBS, no matter how understaffed we are."

The waiter came then. Michaels dug into the chicken marinated in red wine. It was as good as it was supposed to be. Morrie Harris made ecstatic noises about the sauce on his pompano.

After a while, Michaels said, "The longer we try, the harder it gets for us to keep things under control down here. One of these days—"

"It'll all go up," Harris said matter-of-factly. "Yeah, but not now. Now is what we gotta worry about. We're fighting a civil war here, we ain't gonna have much luck with the Germans and the Japs. That's what Hitler has in mind."

"Maybe Hamlin and Stevens should have done something different—God knows what—back then. It might have kept us out of—this," Michaels said. He knew that was heresy for an FBS man, but everything that had happened to him since he got to New Orleans left him depressed with the state of things as they were.

"What were they supposed to do?" Harris snapped.

"I already said I didn't know," Michaels answered, wishing he'd kept his mouth shut. What did the posters say?—LOOSE LIPS SINK SHIPS. His loose lips were liable to sink him.

Sure enough, Morrie Harris went on as if he hadn't spoken: "The Johnnies rebelled, killed a few hundred thousand American boys, and shot a president dead. What should we do, give 'em a nice pat on the back? We beat 'em and we made 'em pay. Far as I can see, they deserved it."

"Yeah, and they've been making us pay ever since." Michaels raised a weary hand. "The hell with it. Like you said, now is what we've got to worry about. But with Ducange dead, what sort of channels do we have into the rebel underground?"

Morrie Harris' mouth twisted, as if he'd bitten down on something rotten. "No good ones that I know of. We've relied too much on the Negroes down here over the years. It's made the whites trust us even less than they would have otherwise. Maybe, though, just maybe, Ducange talked to somebody before he got killed, and that somebody will try to get hold of you."

"So what do you want me to do, then? Hang around my hotel room hoping the phone rings, like a girl waiting to see if a boy will call. Hell of a way to spend my time in romantic New Orleans."

"Listen, the kind of romance you can get here, you'll flunk a shortarm inspection three days later," Harris answered, chasing the last bits of pompano around his plate. "They'll take a damnyankee's money, but they'll skin you every chance they get. They must be laughing their asses off at the fortune they're making off our boys in uniform."

"Sometimes they won't even take your money." Michaels told of the trouble he'd had unloading the Lincoln half-dollar.

"Yeah, I've seen that," Harris said. "If they want to cut off their nose to spite their face, by me it's all right." He set a five and a couple of singles on the table. "This one's on me. Whatever else you say about this damn town, the food is hellacious, no two ways about it."

"No arguments." Michaels got up with Harris. They went out of Antoine's separately, a couple of minutes apart. As he walked back to the New Orleans Hotel, Michaels kept checking to make sure nobody was following him. He didn't spot anyone, but he didn't know how much that proved. If anybody wanted to put multiple tails on him, he wouldn't twig, not in crowded streets like these.

The crowds got worse when a funeral procession tied up traffic on Rampart Street. Two black horses pulled the hearse; their driver was a skinny, sleepy-looking white man who looked grotesquely out of place in top hat and tails. More coaches and buggies followed, and a couple of cars as well. "All right, let's get it moving!" an MP shouted when the procession finally passed.

"They keep us here any longer, we all go in the ovens from old age," a local said, and several other people laughed as they crossed the street. Michaels wanted to ask what the ovens were, but kept quiet since he exposed himself as one of the hated occupiers every time he opened his mouth.

When he got back to the hotel, he stopped at the front desk to ask if he had any messages. The clerk there today was a Negro man in a sharp suit and tie, with a brass name badge on his right lapel that read THADDEUS JENKINS. He checked and came back shaking his head. "Rest assured, sir, we shall make sure you receive any that do come in," he said—a Northern accent bothered him not in the least.

"Thank you very much, Mr. Jenkins," Michaels said.

"Our pleasure to serve you, sir," the clerk replied. "Anything we can do to make your stay more pleasant, you have but to ask."

"You're very kind," Michaels said. Jenkins had reason to be kind to Northerners. The power of the federal government maintained Negroes at the top of the heap in the old Confederacy. With the Sixteenth Amendment disenfranchising most Rebel soldiers and their descendants, blacks had a comfortable majority among those eligible to vote—and used it, unsurprisingly, in their own interest.

Michaels mused on that as he walked to the elevator. The operator, a white man, tipped his cap with more of the insincere obsequiousness Michaels had already noted. He wondered how the fellow liked taking orders from a man whose ancestors his great-grandfather might have owned. Actually, he didn't need to wonder. The voting South was as reliably Republican as could be, for the blacks had no illusions about how long their power would last if the Sixteenth were ever to be discarded.

Suddenly curious, he asked the elevator man, "Why don't I see 'Repeal the Sixteenth' written on walls along with 'Yanks Out'?"

The man measured him with his eyes—measured him for a coffin, if his expression meant anything. At last, as if speaking to a moron, he answered, "You don't see that on account of askin' you to repeal it'd mean you damnyankees got some kind o' business bein' down here and lordin' it over us in the first place. And you *ain't*."

So there, Michaels thought. The rest of the ride passed in silence.

With a soft whir, the ceiling fan stirred the air in his room. That improved things, but only slightly. He looked out the window. Ferns had sprouted from the mortar between bricks of the building across the street. Even without the rain—which had now let up—it was plenty humid enough for the plants to flourish.

Sitting around waiting for the phone to ring gave Michaels plenty of time to watch the ferns. As Morrie Harris had instructed, he spent most of his time in his room. He sallied forth primarily to eat. Not even the resolute hostility of most of white New Orleans put a damper on the food.

He ate boiled beef at Maylié's, crab meat *au gratin* at Galatoire's, crayfish bisque at La Louisiane, *langouste* Sarah Bernhardt at Arnaud's, and, for variety, pig knuckles and sauerkraut at Kolb's. When he didn't feel like traveling, he ate at the hotel's own excellent restaurant. He began to fancy his trousers and collars getting tighter than they had been before he came South.

One night, he woke to the sound of rifle fire not far away. Panic shot through him, panic and shame. Had the uprising he'd come here to check broken out? How would that look on his FBS personnel record? Then he realized that, if the uprising had broken out, any damnyankee the Johnnies caught was likely to end up too dead to worry about what his personnel record looked like.

After about fifteen minutes, the gunfire petered out. Michaels took a couple of hours falling asleep again, though. He went from one radio station to another the next morning, and checked the afternoon newspapers, too. No one said a word about the firefight. Had anybody tried, prosecutors armed with the Sedition Act would have landed on him like a ton of bricks.

Back in the Loyal States, they smugly said the Sedition Act kept the lid on things down South. Michaels had believed it, too. Now he was getting a feeling for how much pressure pushed against that lid. When it blew, if it blew . . .

A little past eleven the next night, the phone rang. He jumped, then ran to it. "Hello?" he said sharply.

The voice on the other end was so muffled, he wasn't sure whether it belonged to a man or a woman. It said, "Be at the Original Absinthe House for the three A.M. show." The line went dead.

Michaels let out a martyred sigh. "The three A.M. show," he muttered, wondering why conspirators couldn't keep civilized hours like anyone else. He went down to the restaurant and had a couple of cups of strong coffee laced with brandy. Thus fortified, he headed out into the steaming night.

He soon concluded New Orleans' idea of civilized hours had nothing to do with those kept by the rest of the world, or possibly that New Orleans defined civilization as unending revelry. The French Quarter was as packed as it had been when he went through it toward Jackson Square, though that had been in the relatively early evening, close to civilized even by Midwestern standards.

The Original Absinthe House, a shabby two-story building with an iron railing around the balcony to the second floor, stood on the corner of Bourbon and Bienville. Each of the four doors leading in had a semicircular window above it. Alongside one of the doors, someone had scrawled, *Absinthe makes the heart grow fonder.* Michaels thought that a distinct improvement on *Yanks Out!* You weren't supposed to be able to get real absinthe any more, but in the Vieux Carré nothing would have surprised him.

He didn't want absinthe, anyway. He didn't particularly want the whiskey and soda he ordered, either, but you couldn't go into a place like this without doing some drinking. The booze was overpriced and not very good. The mysterious voice on the telephone hadn't told him there was a five-buck charge to go up to the second story and watch the floor show. Assuming he got out of here alive, he'd have a devil of a time justifying that on his expense account. And if the call had been a Johnny Reb setup, were they trying to kill him or just to bilk him out of money for the cause?

Michaels felt he was treading in history's footsteps as he went up the stairs. If the plaque on the wall didn't lie for the benefit of tourists, that stairway had been there since the Original Absinthe House was built in the early nineteenth century. Andrew Jackson and Jean Lafitte had gone up it to plan the defense of New Orleans against the British in 1814, and

Ben Butler for carefully undescribed purposes half a century later. It was made with wooden pegs: not a nail anywhere. If the stairs weren't as old as the plaque claimed, they sure as hell were a long way from new.

A jazz band blared away in the big upstairs room. Michaels went in, found a chair, ordered a drink from a waitress whose costume would have been too skimpy for a burly queen most places up North, and leaned back to enjoy the music. The band was about half black, half white. Jazz was one of the few things the two races shared in the South. Not all Negroes had made it to the top of the heap after the North crushed the Great Rebellion; many still lived in the shadow of the fear and degradation of the days of slavery and keenly felt the resentment of the white majority. That came out in the way they played. And the whites, as conquered people will, found liberation in their music that they could not have in life.

Michaels looked at his watch. It was a quarter to three. The jazz men were just keeping loose between shows, then. As he sipped his whiskey, the room began filling up in spite of the five-dollar cover charge. He didn't know what the show would be, but he figured it had to be pretty hot to pack 'em in at those prices.

The lights went out. For a moment, only a few glowing cigarette coals showed in the blackness. The band didn't miss a beat. From right behind Michaels' head, a spotlight came on, bathing the stage in harsh white light.

Saxophone and trumpets wailed lasciviously. When the girls paraded onto the stage, Michaels felt his jaw drop. A vice cop in Cleveland, say, might have put the cuffs on his waitress because she wasn't wearing enough. The girls up there had on high-heeled shoes, headdresses with dyed ostrich plumes and glittering rhinestones, and nothing between the one and the other but big, wide smiles.

He wondered how they got themselves case-hardened enough to go on display like that night after night, show after show. They were all young and pretty and built, no doubt about that. Was it enough? His sister was young and pretty and built, too. He wouldn't have wanted her up there, flaunting it for horny soldiers on leave.

He wondered how much the owners had to pay to keep the local vice squad off their backs. Then he wondered if New Orleans bothered with a vice squad. He hadn't seen any signs of one.

He also wondered who the devil had called him over here and how that person would make contact. Sitting around gaping at naked women was not something he could put in his report unless it had some sort of connection with the business for which he'd come down here.

Soldiers and sailors whooped at the girls, whose skins soon grew slick and shiny with sweat. Waitresses moved back and forth, getting in the way as little as possible while they took drink orders. To fit in, Michaels ordered another whiskey-and-soda, and discovered it cost more than twice as much here as it had downstairs. He didn't figure the Original Absinthe House would go out of business any time soon.

The music got even hotter than it had been. The dancers stepped off the edge of the stage and started prancing among the tables. Michaels' jaw dropped all over again. This wasn't just a floor show. This was a— He didn't quite know what it was, and found himself too flustered to grope for *le mot juste.*

Then a very pretty naked brunette sat down in his lap and twined her arms around his neck.

"Is that a gun in your pocket, dearie, or are you just glad to see me?" she said loudly. Men at the nearest table guffawed. Since it was a gun in his pocket, Michaels kept his mouth shut. The girl smelled of sweat and whiskey and makeup. What her clammy hide was doing to his shirt and trousers did not bear thinking about. He wanted to drop her on the floor and get the hell out of there.

She was holding him too tight for that, though. She lowered her head to nuzzle his neck; the plumes from her headdress got in his eyes and tickled his nose. But under the cover of that frantic scene, her voice went low and urgent: "You got to talk with Colquit the hearse driver, Mister. Tell him Lucy says Pierre says he can talk, an' maybe he will."

Before he could ask her any questions, she kissed him on the lips. The kiss wasn't faked; her tongue slid into his mouth. He'd had enough whiskey and enough shocks by then that he didn't care what he did. His hand closed over her breast—and she sprang to her feet and twisted away, all in perfect time to the music. A moment later, she was in somebody else's lap.

Michaels discovered he'd spilled most of his overpriced drink. He downed what was left with one big swig. When he wiped his mouth with a napkin, it came away red from the girl's—Lucy's—lipstick.

Some of the naked dancers had more trouble than Lucy disentangling themselves from the men they'd chosen. Some of them didn't even try to disentangle. Michaels found himself staring, bugeyed. You couldn't do *that* in public . . . could you? Hell and breakfast, it was illegal in private, most places.

Eventually, all the girls were back on stage. They gave it all they had for the finale. Then they trooped off and the lights came back up. Only after they were gone did Michaels understand the knowing look most of them had had all through the performance: they knew more about men than men, most often, cared to know about themselves.

In the palm of his hand, he could still feel the memory of the soft, firm flesh of Lucy's breast. Unlike the others in the room, he'd had to be here. He hadn't had to grab her, though. Sometimes, facetiously, you called a place like this educational. He'd learned something, all right, and rather wished he hadn't.

Morrie Harris pursed his lips. "Lucy says Pierre says Colquit can talk? That's not much to go on. For all we know, it could be a trap."

"Yeah, it could be," Michaels said. He and the other FBS man walked along in front of the St. Louis Cathedral, across the street from Jackson Square. They might have been businessmen, they might have been sightseers—though neither businessmen nor sightseers were particularly common in the states that had tried to throw off the Union's yoke. Michaels went on, "I don't think it's a trap, though. Ducange's first name is—was—Pierre, and we've found out he did go to the Original Absinthe House. He could have gotten to know Lucy there."

He could have done anything with Lucy there. The feel of her would not leave Michaels' mind. He knew going back to the upstairs room would be dangerous, for him and for her, but the temptation lingered like a bit of food between the teeth that keeps tempting back the tongue.

Harris said, "Maybe we ought to just haul her in and grill her till she cracks."

"We risk alerting the Rebs if we do that," Michaels said.

"Yeah, I know." Harris slammed his fist into his palm. "I hate sitting around doing nothing, though. If they get everything they need before we find out where they're squirreling it away, they start their damn uprising and the war effort goes straight out the window." He scowled, a man in deep and knowing it. "And Colquit the hearse driver? You don't know his last name? You don't know which mortuary he works for? Naked little Lucy didn't whisper those into your pink and shell-like ear?"

"I told you what she told me." Michaels stared down at the pavement in dull embarrassment. He could feel his dubiously shell-like ears turning red, not pink.

"All right, all right." Harris threw his hands in the air. Most FBS men made a point of not showing what they were thinking—Gary Cooper might have been the Bureau's ideal. Not Morrie Harris. He wore his feelings on his sleeve. *New York City,* Michaels thought, with scorn he nearly didn't notice himself. Harris went on, "We try and find him, that's all. How many guys are there named Colquit, even in New Orleans? And yeah, you don't have to tell me we got to be careful. If he knows anything, we don't want him riding in a hearse instead of driving one."

A bit of investigation—if checking the phone book and getting somebody with the proper accent to call the Chamber of Commerce could be dignified as such—soon proved funerals were big business in New Orleans, bigger than most other places, maybe. There were mortuaries and cemeteries for Jews, for Negroes, for French-speakers, for Protestants, for this group, for that one, and for the other. Because New Orleans was mostly below sea level (Michaels heartily wished the town were under-water, too), burying people was more complicated than digging a hole and putting a coffin down in it, too. Some intrepid sightseers made special pilgrimages just to see the funeral vaults, which struck Michaels as downright macabre.

Once they had a complete list of funeral establishments, Morrie Harris started calling them one by one. His New York accent was close enough to the local one for him to ask, "Is Colquit there?" without giving himself away as a damnyankee. Time after time, people denied ever hearing of Colquit. At one establishment, though, the receptionist asked whether he meant Colquit the embalmer or Colquit the bookkeeper. He hung up in a hurry.

Repeated failure left Michaels frustrated. He was about to suggest knocking off for the day when Harris suddenly jerked in his chair as if he'd sat on a tack. He put his hand over the receiver and mouthed, "Said he just got back from a funeral. She's going out to get him." He handed the telephone to Michaels.

After just over a minute, a man's voice said, "Hello? Who's this?"

"Colquit?" Michaels asked.

"Yeah," the hearse driver said.

Maybe it was Michaels' imagination, but he thought he heard suspicion even in one slurred word. Sounding like someone from the Loyal States got you nowhere around here (of course, a Johnny Reb who managed to get permission to travel to Wisconsin also raised eyebrows up there, but Michaels wasn't in Wisconsin now). He spoke quickly: "Lucy told me Pierre told her that I should tell you it was okay for you to talk with me."

He waited for Colquit to ask what the hell he was talking about, or else to hang up. It would figure if the only steer he'd got was a bum one. But the hearse driver, after a long pause, said, "Yeah?" again.

Michaels waited for more, but there wasn't any more. It was up to him, then. "You do know what I'm talking about?" he asked, rather desperately.

"Yeah," Colquit repeated: a man of few words.

"You can't talk where you are?"

"Nope," Colquit said—variety.

"Will you meet me for supper outside Galatoire's tonight at seven, then?" Michaels said. With a good meal and some booze in him, Colquit was more likely to spill his guts.

"Make it tomorrow," Colquit said.

"All right, tomorrow," Michaels said unhappily. More delay was the last thing he wanted. No, not quite: he didn't want to spook Colquit, either. He started to say something more, but the hearse driver did hang up on him then.

"What does he know?" Morrie Harris demanded after Michaels hung up, too.

"I'll find out tomorrow," Michaels answered. "The way things have gone since I got down here, that's progress." Harris nodded solemnly.

The wail of police sirens woke Neil Michaels from a sound sleep. The portable alarm clock he'd brought with him was ticking away on the table by his bed. Its radium dial announced the hour: 3:05. He groaned and sat up.

Along with the sirens came the clanging bells and roaring motors of fire engines. Michaels bounced out of bed, ice running down his back. Had the Rebs started their revolt? In that kind of chaos, the pistol he'd brought down from the North felt very small and useless.

He cocked his head. He didn't hear any gunfire. If the Southern men were using whatever the Nazis had shipped them, that would be the biggest part of the racket outside. Okay, it wasn't the big revolt. That meant walking to the window and looking out was likely to be safe. What the devil *was* going on?

Michaels pushed aside the thick curtain shielding the inside of his room from the neon glare that was New Orleans by night. Even as he watched, a couple of fire engines tore down Canal Street toward the Vieux Carré. Their flashing red lights warned the few cars and many pedestrians to get the hell out of the way.

Raising his head, Michaels spotted the fire. Whatever was burning was burning to beat the band. Flames leaped into the night sky, seeming to dance as they flung themselves high above the building that fueled them. A column of thick black smoke marked that building's funeral pyre.

"Might as well find out what it is," Michaels said out loud. He turned on the lamp by the bed and then the radio. The little light behind the dial came on. He waited impatiently for the tubes to get warm enough to bring in a signal.

The first station he got was playing one of Benny Goodman's records. Michaels wondered if playing a damnyankee's music was enough to get you in trouble with some of the fire-eating Johnny Rebs. But he didn't want to hear jazz, not now. He spun the dial.

"—Terrible fire on Bourbon Street," an announcer was saying. That had to be the blaze Michaels had seen. The fellow went on, "One of New Orleans' longstanding landmarks, the Original Absinthe House, is going up in flames even as I speak. The Absinthe House presents shows all through the night, and many are feared dead inside. The building was erected well over a hundred years ago, and has seen—"

Michaels turned off the radio, almost hard enough to break the knob. He didn't believe in coincidence, not even a little bit. Somewhere in the wreckage of the Original Absinthe House would lie whatever mortal fragments remained of Lucy the dancer, and that was just how someone wanted it to be.

He shivered like a man with the grippe. He'd thought about asking Colquit to meet him there instead of at Galatoire's, so Lucy could help persuade the hearse driver to tell whatever he knew—and so he could get another look at her. But going to a place twice running . . . That let the opposition get a line on you. Training had saved his life and, he hoped, Colquit's. It hadn't done poor Lucy one damn bit of good.

He called down to room service and asked for a bottle of whiskey. If the man to whom he gave the order found anything unusual about such a request at twenty past three, he didn't show it. The booze arrived in short order. After three or four good belts, Michaels was able to get back to sleep.

Colquit didn't show up for dinner at Galatoire's that night.

When Morrie Harris phoned the mortuary the next day, the receptionist said Colquit had called in sick. "That's a relief," Michaels said when Harries reported the news. "I was afraid he'd call in dead."

"Yeah." Harris ran a hand through his curly hair. "I didn't want to try and get a phone number and address out of the gal. I didn't even like making the phone call. The less attention we draw to the guy, the better."

"You said it." Michaels took off his glasses, blew a speck from the left lens, set them back on his nose. "Now we know where he works. We can find out where he lives. Just a matter of digging through the papers."

"A lot of papers to dig through," Harris said with a grimace, "but yeah, that ought to do the job. Shall we head on over to the Hall of Records?"

Machine-gun nests surrounded the big marble building on Thalia Street. If the Johnny Rebs ever got their revolt off the ground, it would be one of the first places to burn. The Federal army and bureaucrats who controlled the conquered provinces of the old Confederacy ruled not only by force but also by keeping tabs on their resentful, rebellious subjects. Every white man who worked had to fill out a card each year listing his place of employment. Every firm had to list its employees. Most of the clerks who checked one set of forms against the other were Negroes. They had a vested interest in making sure nobody put one over on the government.

Tough, unsmiling guards meticulously checked Harris and Michaels' identification papers, comparing photographs to faces and making them give samples of their signatures, before admitting them to the hall. They feared sabotage as well as out-and-out assault. The records stored here helped down all of Louisiana.

Hannibal Dupuy was a large, round black man with some of the thickest glasses Michaels had ever seen. "Mortuary establishments," he said, holding up one finger as he thought. "Yes, those would be in the Wade Room, in the cases against the east wall." Michaels got the feeling that, had they asked him about anything from taverns to taxidermists, he would have known exactly where the files hid. Such men were indispensable in navigating the sea of papers before them.

Going through the papers stored in the cases against the east wall of the Wade Room took a couple of hours. Michaels finally found the requisite record. "Colquit D. Reynolds, hearse driver—yeah, he works for LeBlanc and Peters," he said. "Okay, here's address and phone number and a notation that they've been verified as correct. People are on the ball here, no two ways about it."

"People have to be on the ball here," Morrie Harris answered. "How'd you like to be a Negro in the South if the whites you've been sitting on for years grab hold of the reins? Especially if they grab hold of the reins with help from the Nazis? The first thing they'd do after they threw us damnyankees out is to start hanging Negroes from lampposts."

"You're right. Let's go track down Mr. Reynolds, so we don't have to find out just how right you are."

Colquit Reynolds' documents said he lived on Carondelet, out past St. Joseph: west and south of the French Quarter. Harris had a car, a wheezy Blasingame that delivered him and Michaels to the requisite address. Michaels knocked on the door of the house, which, like the rest of the neighborhood, was only a small step up from the shotgun shack level.

No one answered. Michaels glanced over at Morrie Harris. FBS men didn't need a warrant, not to search a house in Johnny Reb country. That wasn't the issue. Both of them, though, feared they'd find nothing but a corpse when they got inside.

Just as Michaels was about to break down the front door, an old woman stuck her head out a side window of the house next door and said, "If you lookin' for Colquit, gents, you ain't gonna find him in there."

Morrie Harris swept off his hat and gave a nod that was almost a bow. "Where's he at, then, ma'm?" he asked, doing his best to sound like a local and speaking to the old woman as if she were the military governor's wife.

She cackled like a laying hen; she must have liked that. "Same place you always find him when he wants to drink 'stead of workin': the Old Days Saloon round the co'ner." She jerked a gnarled thumb to show which way.

The Old Days Saloon was painted in gaudy stripes of red, white, and blue. Those were the national colors, and so unexceptionable, but, when taken with the name of the place, were probably meant to suggest the days of the Great Rebellion and the traitors who had used them on a different flag. Michaels would have bet a good deal that the owner of the place had a thick FBS dossier.

He and Harris walked in. The place was dim and quiet. Ceiling fans created the illusion of coolness. The bruiser behind the bar gave the newcomers the dubious stare he obviously hauled out for any stranger: certainly the four or five men in the place had the look of longtime regulars. Asking which one was Colquit was liable to be asking for trouble.

One of the regulars, though, looked somehow familiar. After a moment, Michaels realized why: that old man soaking up a beer off in a corner had driven the horse-drawn hearse that had slowed him up on his way back to the hotel a few days before. He nudged Morrie Harris, nodded toward the old fellow. Together, they went over to him. "How you doin' today, Colquit?" Harris asked in friendly tones. The bartender relaxed.

Colquit looked up at them with eyes that didn't quite focus. "Don't think I know you folks," he said, "but I could be wrong."

"Sure you do," Harris said, expansive still. "We're friends of Pierre and Lucy."

"Oh, Lord help me." Colquit started to get up. Michaels didn't want a scene. Anything at all could make New Orleans go off—hauling a man out of a bar very much included. But Colquit Reynolds slumped back onto his chair, as if his legs didn't want to hold him. "Wish I never told Pierre about none o' that stuff," he muttered, and finished his beer with a convulsive gulp.

Michaels raised a forefinger and called out to the bartender: "Three more High Lifes here." He tried to slur his words into a Southern pattern. Maybe he succeeded, or maybe the dollar bill he tossed down on the table was enough to take the edge off suspicions. The Rebs had revered George Washington even during the Great Rebellion, misguided though they were in other ways.

Colquit Reynolds took a long pull at the new beer. Michaels and Harris drank more moderately. If they were going to get anything out of the hearse driver, they needed to be able to remember it once they had it. Besides, Michaels didn't much like beer. Quietly, so the bartender and the other locals wouldn't hear, he asked, "What do you wish you hadn't told Pierre, Mr. Reynolds?"

Reynolds looked up at the ceiling, as if the answer were written there. Michaels wondered if he was able to remember; he'd been drinking for a while. Finally, he said, "Wish I hadn't told him 'bout this here coffin I took for layin' to rest."

"Oh? Why's that?" Michaels asked casually. He lit a Camel, offered the pack to Colquit Reynolds. When Reynolds took one, he used his Zippo to give the hearse driver a light.

Reynolds sucked in smoke. He held it longer than Michaels thought humanly possible, then exhaled a foggy cloud. After he knocked the coal into an ash tray, he drained his Miller's High Life and looked expectantly at the FBS men. Michaels ordered him another one. Only after he'd drunk part of that did he answer, "On account of they needed a block and tackle to get it onto my hearse an' another one to get it off again. Ain't no six men in the world could have lifted that there coffin, not if they was Samson an' five o' his brothers. An' it *clanked,* too."

"Weapons," Morrie Harris whispered, "or maybe ammunition." He looked joyous, transfigured, likely even more so than he would have if a naked dancing girl had plopped herself down in his lap. *Poor Lucy,* Michaels thought.

He said, "Even in a coffin, even greased, I wouldn't want to bury anything in this ground—not for long, that's for damn sure. Water's liable to seep in and ruin things."

Colquit Reynolds sent him a withering, scornful look. "Damnyankees," he muttered under his breath—and he was helping Michaels. "Lot of the times here, you don't bury your dead, you put 'em in a tomb up above ground, just so as coffins don't get flooded out o' the ground come the big rains."

"Jesus," Morrie Harris said hoarsely, wiping his forehead with a sleeve, and then again: "Jesus." Now he was the one to drain his beer and signal for another. Once the bartender had come and gone, he went on, "All the above-ground tombs New Orleans has, you could hide enough guns and ammo to fight a big war. Goddamn sneaky Rebs." He made himself stop. "What cemetery was this at, Mr. Reynolds?"

"Old Girod, out on South Liberty Street," Colquit Reynolds replied. "Don' know how much is there, but one coffinload, anyways."

"Thank God some Southern men don't want to see the Great Rebellion start up again," Michaels said.

"Yeah." Harris drank from his new High Life. "But a hell of a lot of 'em *do.*"

Girod Cemetery was hidden away in the railroad yards. A plaque on the stone fence surrounding it proclaimed it to be the oldest Protestant cemetery in New Orleans. Neil Michaels was willing to believe that. The place didn't seem to have received much in the way of legitimate business in recent years, and had a haunted look to it. It was overgrown with vines and shrubs. Gray-barked fig trees pushed up through the sides of some of the old tombs. Moss was everywhere, on trees and tombs alike. Maidenhair ferns sprouted from the sides of the above-ground vaults; as Michaels had seen, anything would grow anywhere around here.

That included conspiracies. If Colquit Reynolds was right, the ghost of the Great Rebellion haunted this cemetery, too, and the Johnnies were trying to bring it back to unwholesome life.

"He'd better be right," Michaels muttered as the jeep he was riding pulled to a stop before the front entrance to the cemetery.

Morrie Harris understood him without trouble. "Who, that damn hearse driver? You bet he'd better be right. We bring all this stuff here" —he waved behind him—"and start tearin' up a graveyard, then don't find anything . . . hell, that could touch off a revolt all by itself."

Michaels shivered, though the day was hot and muggy. "Couldn't it just?" Had Reynolds been leading them down the path, setting them up to create an incident that would make the South rise up in righteous fury? They'd have to respond to a story like the one he'd told; for the sake of the Union, they didn't dare not respond.

They'd find out. Behind the jeep, Harris's *all this stuff* rattled and clanked: not just bulldozers, but also light M3 Stoneman tanks and heavy M3 Grants with a small gun in a rotating turret and a big one in a sponson at the right front of the hull. Soldiers—all of them men from the Loyal States—scrambled down from Chevy trucks and set up a perimeter around the wall. If anybody was going to try to interfere with this operation, he'd regret it.

Against the assembled might of the Federal Union (*it must and shall be preserved,* Michaels thought), Girod Cemetery mustered a stout metal gate and one elderly watchman. "Who the devil are y'all, and what d'you want?" he demanded, though the *who* part, at least, should have been pretty obvious.

Michaels displayed his FBS badge. "We are on the business of the federal government of the United States of America," he said. "Open the gate and let us in." Again, no talk of warrants, not in Reb country, not on FBS business.

"Fuck the federal government of the United States of America, and the horse it rode in on," the watchman said. "You ain't got no call to come to no cemetery with tanks."

Michaels didn't waste time arguing with him. He tapped the jeep driver on the shoulder. The fellow backed the jeep out of the way. Michaels waved to the driver of the nearest Grant tank. The tank man had his head out of the hatch. He grinned and nodded. The tank clattered forward, chewing up the pavement and spewing noxious exhaust into the air. The wrought-iron gate was sturdy, but not sturdy enough to withstand thirty-one tons of insistent armor. It flew open with a scream of metal; one side ripped loose from the stone to which it was fixed. The Grant ran over it, and would have run over the watchman, too, had he not skipped aside with a shouted curse.

Outside the cemetery, people began gathering. Most of the people were white men of military age or a bit younger. To Michaels, they had the look of men who'd paint slogans on walls or shoot at a truck or from behind a fence under cover of darkness. He was glad he'd brought overwhelming force. Against bayonets, guns, and armor, the crowd couldn't do much but stare sullenly.

If the cemetery was empty of contraband, what this crowd did wouldn't matter. There'd be similar angry crowds all over the South, and at one of them . . .

The watchman let out an anguished howl as tanks and bulldozers clanked toward the walls of above-ground vaults that ran up and down the length of the cemetery. "You can't go smashin' up the ovens!" he screamed.

"Last warning, Johnny Reb," Michaels said coldly: "don't you try telling officers of the United States what we can and can't do. We have places to put people whose mouths get out in front of their brains."

"Yeah, I just bet you do," the watchman muttered, but after that he kept his mouth shut.

A dozer blade bit into the side of one of the mortuary vaults—an oven, the old man had called it. Concrete and stone flew. So did chunks of a wooden coffin and the bones it had held. The watchman shot Michaels a look of unadulterated hatred and scorn. He didn't say a word, but he might as well have screamed, *See? I told you so*. A lot of times, that look alone would have been plenty to get him on the inside of a prison camp, but Michaels had bigger things to worry about today.

He and Harris hadn't ordered enough bulldozers to take on all the rows of ovens at once. The tanks joined in the job, too, knocking them down as the first big snorting Grant had wrecked the gate into Girod. Their treads ground more coffins and bones into dust.

"That goddamn hearse driver better not have been lying to us," Morrie Harris said, his voice clogged with worry. "If he was, he'll never see a camp or a jail. We'll give the son of a bitch a blindfold; I wouldn't waste a cigarette on him."

Then, from somewhere near the center of Girod Cemetery, a tank crew let out a shout of triumph. Michaels had never heard sweeter music, not from Benny Goodman or Tommy Dorsey. He sprinted toward the Grant. Sweat poured off him, but it wasn't the sweat of fear, not any more.

The tank driver pointed to wooden boxes inside a funeral vault he'd just broken into. They weren't coffins. Each had *1 Maschinengewehr 34* stenciled on its side in neat black letter script, with the Nazi eagle-and-swastika emblem right next to the legend.

Michaels stared at the machine-gun crates as if one of them held the Holy Grail. "He wasn't lying," he breathed. "Thank you, God."

"*Omayn,*" Morrie Harris agreed. "Now let's find out how much truth he was telling."

The final haul, by the time the last oven was cracked the next day, astonished even Michaels and Harris. Michaels read from the list he'd been keeping: "Machine guns, submachine guns, mortars, rifles—including antitank rifles—ammo for all of them, grenades . . . Jesus, what a close call."

"I talked with one of the radio men," Harris said. "He's sent out a call for more trucks to haul all this stuff away." He wiped his forehead with the back of his hand, a gesture that had little to do with heat or humidity. "If they'd managed to smuggle all of this out of New Orleans, spread it around through the South . . . well, hell, I don't have to draw you a picture."

"You sure don't. We'd have been so busy down here, the Germans and the Japs would have had a field day over the rest of the world." Michaels let out a heartfelt sigh of relief, then went on, "Next thing we've got to do is try and find out who was caching weapons. If we can do that, then maybe, just maybe, we can keep the Rebs leaderless for a generation or so and get ahead of the game."

"Maybe." But Harris didn't sound convinced. "We can't afford to think in terms of a generation from now, anyhow. It's what we were talking about when you first got into town: as long as we can hold the lid on the South till we've won the damn war, that'll do the trick. If we catch the guys running guns with the Nazis, great. If we don't, I don't give a damn about them sneaking around painting YANKS OUT on every blank wall they find. We can deal with that. We've been dealing with it since 1865. As long as they don't have the toys they need to really hurt us, we'll get by."

"Yeah, that's true—if no other subs drop off loads of goodies someplace else." Michaels sighed again. "No rest for the weary. If that happens, we'll just have to try and track 'em down."

A growing rumble of diesel engines made Morrie Harris grin. "Here come the trucks," he said, and trotted out toward the ruined entryway to Girod Cemetery. Michaels followed him. Harris pointed. "Ah, good, they're smart enough to have jeeps riding shotgun for 'em. We don't want any trouble around here till we get the weapons away safe."

There were still a lot of people outside the cemetery walls. They booed and hissed the newly arrived vehicles, but didn't try anything more than booing and hissing. They might hate the damnyankees—they *did* hate the damnyankees—but it was the damnyankees who had the firepower here. Close to eighty years of bitter experience had taught that they weren't shy about using it, either.

Captured German weapons and ammunition filled all the new trucks to overflowing. Some of the ones that had brought in troops also got loaded with lethal hardware. The displaced soldiers either piled into jeeps or clambered up on top of tanks for the ride back to their barracks, where the captured arms would be as safe as they could be anywhere in the endlessly rebellious South.

Michaels and Harris had led the convoy to the cemetery; now they'd lead it away. When their jeep driver started up the engine, a few young Rebs bolder than the rest made as if to block the road.

The corporal in charge of the pintle-mounted .50-caliber machine gun in the jeep turned to Michaels and asked, "Shall I mow 'em down, sir?"

He sounded quiveringly eager to do just that.

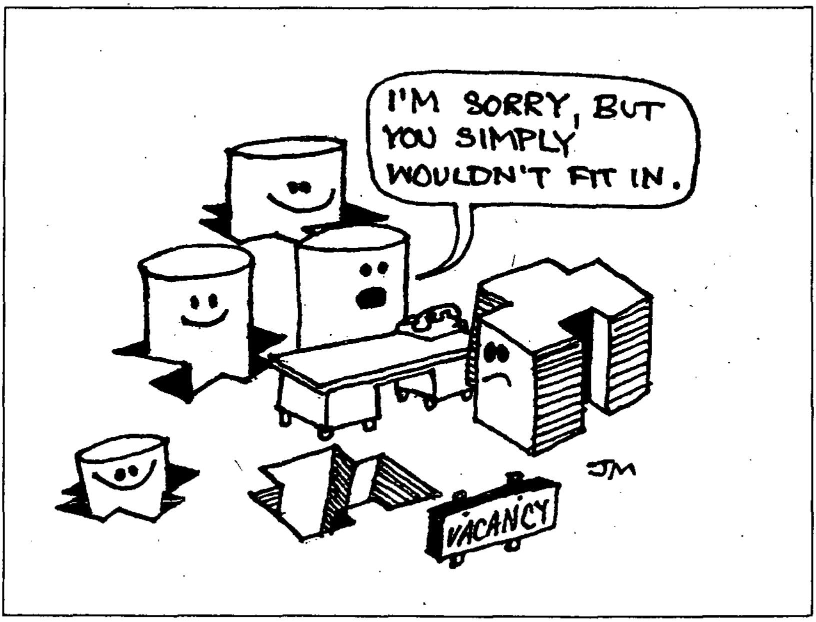
"We'll give 'em one chance first," Michaels said, feeling generous. He stood up in the jeep and shouted to the Johnnies obstructing his path: "You are interfering with the lawful business of the Federal Bureau of Suppression. Disperse at once or you will be shot. First, last, and only warning, people." He sat back down, telling the driver, "Put it in gear, but go slow. If they don't move—" He made hand-washing gestures.

Sullenly, the young men gave way as the jeep moved forward. The gunner swung the muzzle of his weapon back and forth, back and forth, encouraging them to fall back further. The expression on his face, which frightened even Michaels, might have been an even stronger persuader.

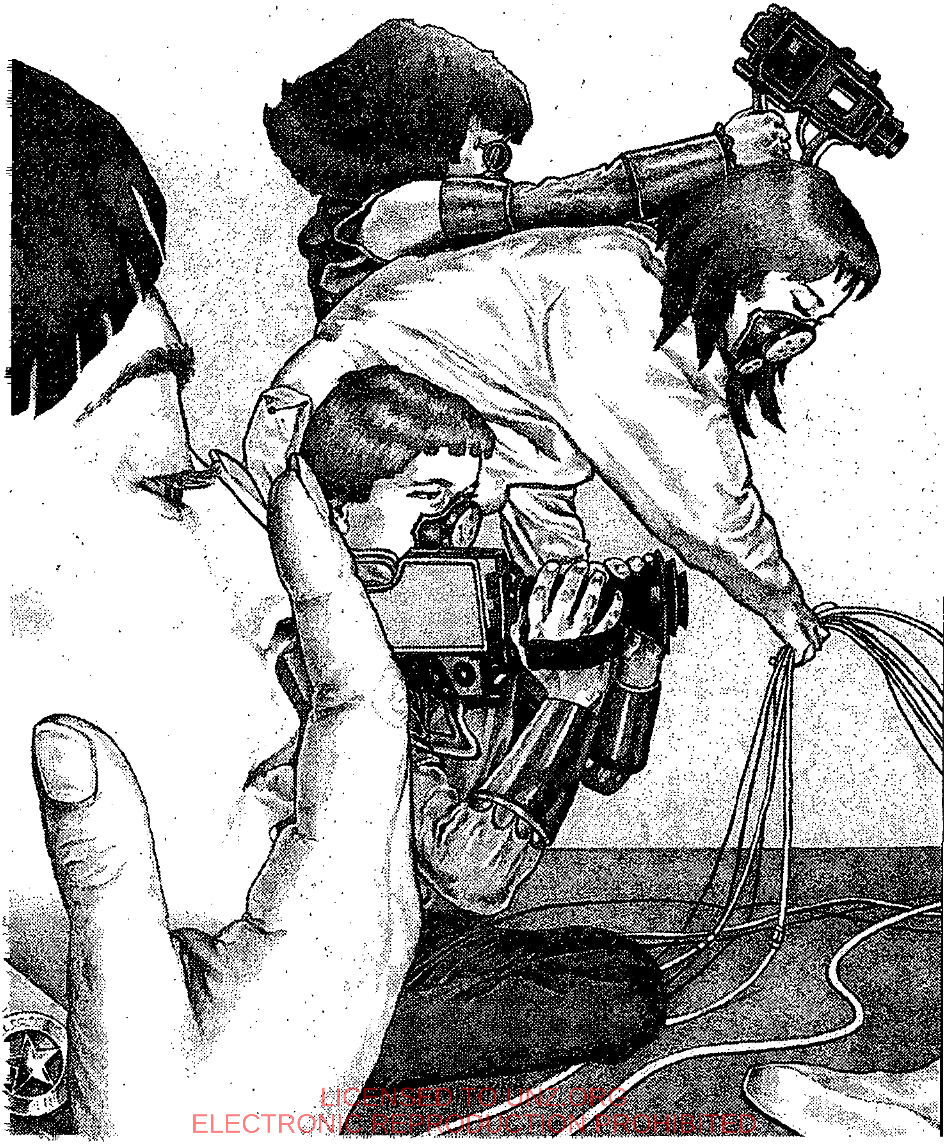
The convoy rattled away from the cemetery. The Johnnies hooted and jeered, but did no more than that, not here, not now. Had they got Nazi guns in their hands . . . but they hadn't.

"We won this one," Morrie Harris said.

"We sure did," Michaels agreed. "Now we can get on with the business of getting rid of tyrants around the world." He spoke altogether without irony. ●


I'M SORRY, BUT YOU SIMPLY WOULDN'T FIT IN.
VACANCY
JM

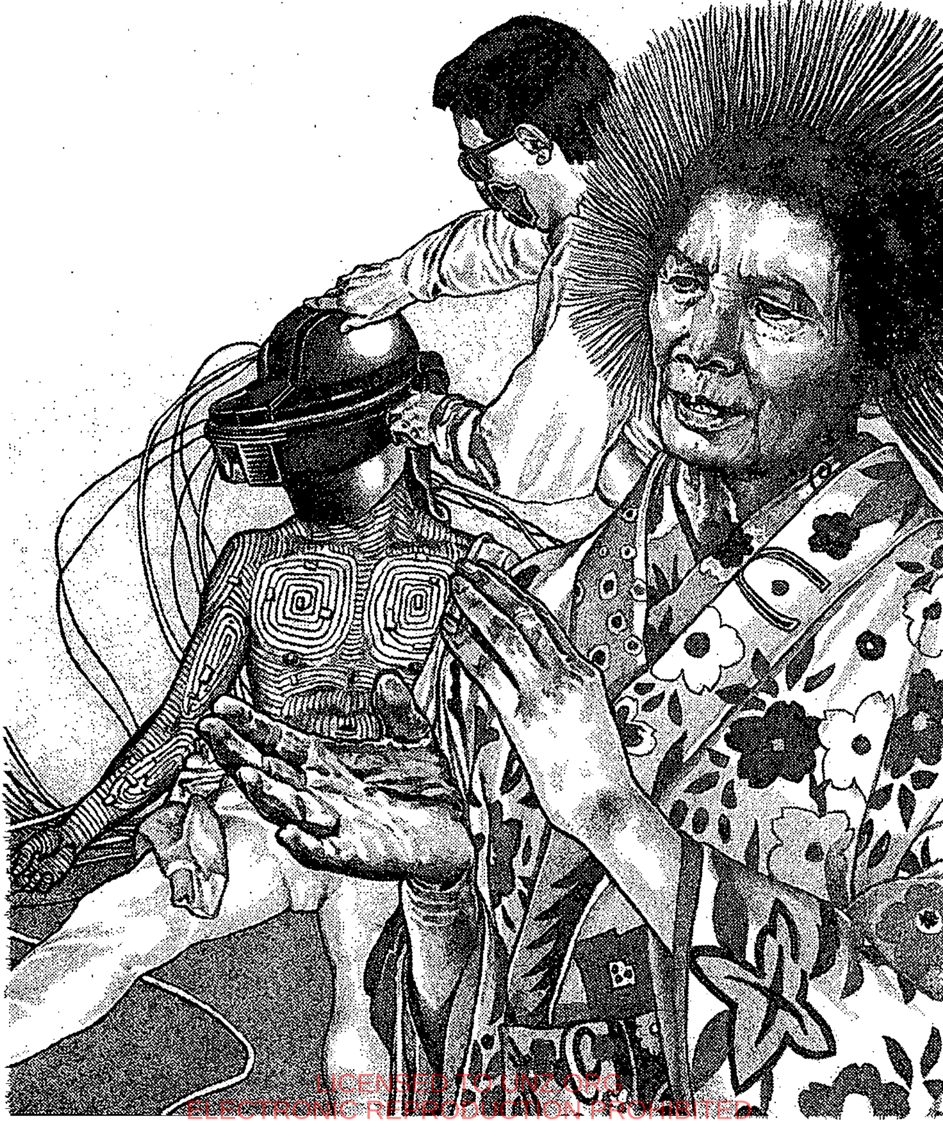
Pat Cadigan recently returned from England, where she received her second Arthur C. Clarke Award for Best Novel and a £1000 cash prize for her book, *Fools*. (She received her first Clarke Award in 1992 for her novel, *Synners*.) In her latest tale for *Asimov's*, the game of murder in virtual reality turns deadly *real* when there's a . . .



Pat Cadigan

DEATH IN THE PROMISED LAND

Illustration by Ron Chironna



The kid had had his choice of places to go—other countries, other worlds, even other universes, à la the legendary exhortation of e. e. cummings, oddly evocative in its day, spookily prescient now. But the kid's idea of a hell of a good universe next door had been a glitzed-out, gritted-up, blasted and blistered post-Apocalyptic Noo Yawk Sitty. It wasn't a singular sentiment—post-Apocalyptic Noo Yawk Sitty was topping the hitline for the thirteenth week in a row, with post-Apocalyptic Ellay and post-Apocalyptic Hong Kong holding steady at two and three, occasionally trading places but defending against all comers.

Dore Konstantin didn't understand the attraction. Perhaps the kid could have explained it to her if he had not come out of post-Apocalyptic Noo Yawk Sitty with his throat cut.

Being DOA after a session in the Sitty wasn't singular, either; immediate information available said that this was number eight in as many months. So far, no authority was claiming that the deaths were related, although no one was saying they weren't, either. Konstantin wasn't sure what any of it meant, except that, at the very least, the Sitty would have one more month at the number one spot.

The video parlor night manager was boinging between appalled and thrilled. "You ever go in the Sitty?" she asked Konstantin, crowding into the doorway next to her. Her name was Guilfoyle Pleshette and she didn't make much of a crowd; she was little more than a bundle of sticks wrapped in a gaudy kimono, voice by cartoonland, hair by van der Graaf. She stood barely higher than Konstantin's shoulder, hair included.

"No, never have," Konstantin told her, watching as DiPietro and Celestine peeled the kid's hotsuit off him for the coroner. It was too much like seeing an animal get skinned, only grislier, and not just because most of the kid's blood was on the hotsuit. Underneath, his naked flesh was imprinted with a dense pattern of lines and shapes, byzantine in complexity, from the wires and sensors in the 'suit.

Yes, it's the latest in nervous systems, Konstantin imagined a chatty lecturer's voice saying. *The neo-exo-nervous system, generated by hotsuit coverage. Each line and shape has its counterpart on the opposite side of the skin barrier, which cannot at this time be breached under pain of—*

The imaginary lecture cut off as the coroner's cam operator leaned in for a shot of the kid's head and shoulders, forcing the stringer from *Police Blotter* back against the facing wall. Unperturbed, the stringer held her own cam over her head, aimed the lens downward and kept taping. This week, *Police Blotter* had managed to reverse the injunction against commercial networks that had been reinstated last week. Konstantin couldn't wait for next week.

As the 'suit cleared the kid's hips, the smell of human waste fought with the heavy odor of blood and the sour stink of sweat for control of the air in the room, which wasn't much larger than the walk-out closet that

Konstantin had shared with her ex. The closet had looked a lot bigger this morning now that her ex's belongings were gone, but this room seemed to be shrinking by the moment. The coroner, her cam operator, the stringer, and DiPietro and Celestine had all come prepared with nasal filters; Konstantin's were sitting in the top drawer of her desk.

Putting her hand over her nose and mouth, she stepped back into the hallway where her partner Taliaferro was also suffering, but from the narrow space and low ceiling rather than the air, which was merely over-processed and stale. Pleshette followed, fishing busily in her kimono pockets.

"So *bad*," she said, looking from Konstantin to Taliaferro. Taliaferro gave no indication that he had heard her. He stood with his back to the wall and his shoulders up around his ears, head thrust forward over the archiver while he made notes, as if he expected the ceiling to come down on him. From Konstantin's angle, the archiver was completely hidden by his hand, so that he seemed to be using the stylus directly on his palm.

Never send a claustrophobe to do an agoraphobe's job, Konstantin thought, feeling surreal. Taliaferro, who pronounced his name "tolliver" for reasons she couldn't fathom, was such a big guy anyway that she wondered if most places short of an arena didn't feel small and cramped to him.

"*Real* goddam *bad*," Pleshette added, as if this somehow clarified her original statement. One bony hand came up out of a hidden pocket with a small spritzer; a too-sweet, minty odor cut through the flat air.

Taliaferro's stylus froze as his eyes swiveled to the manager. "That didn't help," he said darkly.

"Oh, but wait," she said, waving both hands to spread the scent. "Smellin' the primer now, but soon, *nothing*. Deadens the nose, use it by the *pound* here. Trade puts out a *lot* of body smell in the actioners. 'Suits *reek*." She gestured at the other doors lining the long narrow hall. "Like that *Gang Wars* module? Strapped the trade down on chaises, otherwise they'd a killed the 'suits, rollin' around on the floor, bouncin' offa the walls, jumpin' on each other. Real easy to go native in a *Gang Wars* module."

Go native? Taliaferro mouthed, looking at Konstantin from under his brows. Konstantin shrugged. "I didn't see a chaise in there."

"Folds down outa the wall. Like those old Murphy beds?"

Konstantin raised her eyebrows, impressed that she was even acquainted with the idea of Murphy beds, and then felt mildly ashamed. Her ex had always told her that being a snob was her least attractive feature.

"Most people don't use the chaises except for the sexers," Pleshette was saying. "Not if they got a choice. And there was this one blowfish, he hurt himself on the *chaise*. Got all heated up struggling, cut himself on the straps, broke some ribs. And *that—"* she leaned toward Konstantin confidentially "—*that* wasn't even the *cute* part. Know what the *cute* part was?"

Konstantin shook her head.

"The *cute* part was, his pov was in this fight at the *exact, same time* and broke the *exact, same ribs."* Pleshette straightened up and folded her arms, lifting her chin defiantly as if daring Konstantin to disbelieve. "This's *always* been non-safe, even before it was fatal."

"That happen here?" Taliaferro asked without looking up.

"Nah, some other place. East Hollywood, North Hollywood, I don't remember now." The manager's kimono sleeve flapped like a wing as she gestured. "We all heard about it. Stuff gets around."

Konstantin nodded, biting her lip so she wouldn't smile. "Uh-huh. Is this the same guy who didn't open his parachute in a skydiving scenario and was found dead with every bone in his body shattered?"

"Well, of *course* not." Pleshette looked at her as if she were crazy. "How could it be? *That* blowfish *died*. We all heard about that one too. Happened in D.C. They got it going on in D.C. with those sudden-death thrillers." She leaned toward Konstantin again, putting one scrawny hand on her arm this time. "You oughta check D.C. sources for deathtrips. Life's so cheap there. It's a whole different world."

Konstantin was trying to decide whether to agree with her or change the subject when the coroner emerged from the cubicle with the cam op right on her heels.

"—shot everything *I* shot," the cam op was saying unhappily.

"And I said never *mind*." The coroner waved a dismissive hand. "We can subpoena her footage and see if it really is better than yours. Probably isn't. *Go*." She gave him a little push.

"But I just *know* she's in some of my shots—"

"We can handle that, too. *Go. Now*." The coroner shooed him away and turned to Konstantin. She was a small person, about the size of a husky ten-year-old—something to do with her religion, Konstantin remembered, the Church of Small-Is-Beautiful. The faithful had their growth inhibited in childhood. Konstantin wondered what happened to those who lost the faith, or came to it later in life.

"Well, I can say without fear of contradiction that the kid's throat was cut while he was still alive." The coroner looked around. "And in a palace like this. Imagine that."

"Should I also imagine how?" Konstantin asked.

The coroner smoothed down the wiry copper cloud that was her current hair. It sprang back up immediately. "Onsite micro says it was definitely a knife or some other metal with an edge, and not glass or porcelain. And definitely not self-inflicted. Even if we couldn't tell by the angle, this kid was an AR softie. He wouldn't have had the strength to saw through his own windpipe like that."

"What kind of knife, do you think?"

"Sharp and sturdy, probably a boning blade. Boning blades're all the rage out there. Or rather, *in* there. In the actioners. They all like those boning blades."

Konstantin frowned. "Great. You know what's going to be on the news inside an hour."

The coroner fanned the air with one small hand. "Yeah, yeah, yeah. Gameplayers' psychosis, everybody's heard about somebody who got stabbed in a module and came out with a knife-wound it took sixteen stitches to close and what about the nun who was on TV with the bleeding hands and feet. It's part of the modern myth-making machine. There've been some people who went off their perch in AR, got all mixed up about what was real and hurt themselves or somebody else. But the stigmata stuff—everybody conveniently forgets how the stigmata of Sister-Mary-Blood-Of-The-Sacred-Whatever got exposed as a hoax by her own order. The good sister did a turn as a stage magician before she got religion. There's a file about how she did it floating around PubNet—you oughta look it up. Fascinatin' rhythms. The real thing would be *extremo ruptura,* very serious head trouble, which the experts are pretty sure nobody's had since St. Theresa."

"Which one?" asked Konstantin.

The coroner chuckled. "That's good. 'Which one?' " She shook her head, laughing some more. "I'll have my report in your in-box tomorrow." She went up the hall, still laughing.

"Well," said the night manager, sniffing with disdain. "*Some* people ought better stick with what they know than mock what they *don't know squat about.*"

"My apologies if she offended your beliefs," Konstantin said to her. "Is there some other way into that room that nobody knows about—vents, conduits, emergency exit or access?"

Pleshette wagged her fuzzy head from side to side. "Nope."

Konstantin was about to ask for the building's blueprints when Taliaferro snapped the archiver closed with a sound like a rifle shot. "Right. Some great place you got here. We'll interview the clientele now. Outside, in the parking lot."

"*Got* no parking lot," Pleshette said, frowning.

"Didn't say *your* parking lot. There's a car rental place down the block. We'll corral everyone, do it there." Taliaferro looked at Konstantin. "Spacious. Lots of room to move around in."

Konstantin sighed. "First let's weed out everyone who was in the same scenario and module with the kid and see if anyone remembers the kid doing or saying anything that could give any hints about what was happening to him." She started up the hall with Taliaferro.

"You could do that yourself, you know," Pleshette said.

Konstantin stopped. Taliaferro kept walking without looking back. "Do what?"

"See what the kid was doing when he took it in the neck. Surveillance'll have it."

"Surveillance?" Konstantin said, unsure that she had heard correctly.

"Of *course* surveillance," the night manager said, giving her a sideways look. "You think we let the blowfish come in here and don't keep an eye on them? *Anything* could happen, I don't want no liability for the bone in somebody else's head. Nobody does."

"Can I screen this surveillance record in your office?" she asked.

"Anywhere, if all you want to do is screen it." Pleshette frowned, puzzled.

"Good. Set me up for it in your office."

Pleshette's frown deepened. "My office."

"Is that some kind of problem?" asked Konstantin, pausing as she moved toward the open doorway of the room, where she could hear DiPietro and Celestine bantering with the stringer.

"Guess not." The night manager shrugged. "You just want to screen it, my office, sure."

Konstantin didn't know what to make of the look on Pleshette's funny little face. Maybe that was all it was, a funny little face in a funny little open-all-night world. A funny little open-all-night artificial world at that. For all Konstantin knew, the night manager hadn't seen true daylight for years. Not her problem, she thought as she stuck her head through the doorway of the cubicle where Celestine and DiPietro were now busy jockeying for the stringer's attention while the stringer pretended she wasn't pumping them for information and they pretended they didn't know she was pretending not to pump them for information. No one had to pretend the dead kid had been temporarily forgotten.

"Pardon me for interrupting," Konstantin said a bit archly. DiPietro and Celestine turned to her; in their identical white coveralls, they looked like unfinished marionettes.

"Attendants'll be coming for him. Before you do a thorough search of the room, you might want to, oh—" she gestured at the body "—cover *him* up."

"Sure thing," said Celestine, and then suddenly tossed something round and wrapped in plastic at her. "Think fast!"

Konstantin caught it by instinct. The shape registered on her before anything else. The kid's head, she thought, horrified. The cut across his throat had been so deep, it had come off when they'd peeled him.

Then she felt the metal through the plastic and realized it was the kid's head-mounted monitor. "Oh, good one, Celestine." She tucked the monitor under her left arm. "If I'd dropped that, we'd be filling out forms on it for a year."

"*You,* drop something? Not this lifetime." Celestine grinned; her muttonchops made her face seem twice as wide as it was. Konstantin wondered if there was such a thing as suing a cosmetologist for malpractice.

"Thanks for the act of faith but next time, save it for church." Konstantin went up the hall toward the main lobby, Pleshette following in a swish of kimono.

There were only two uniformed officers waiting in the lobby with the other three members of the night staff, who were perched side by side on a broken-down, ersatz-leather sofa by the front window. The rest of the police, along with the clientele, were already down the block with Taliaferro, one of the uniforms told Konstantin. She nodded, trying not to stare at the woman's neat ginger-colored mustache. At least it wasn't as ostentatious as Celestine's muttonchops, but she wasn't sure that she would ever get used to the fashion of facial hair on women. Her ex would have called her a throwback; perhaps she was.

"That's all right, as long as we know where they are." Konstantin handed her the bagged headmount. "Evidence—look after it. There's some surveillance footage I'm going to screen in the manager's office and I thought I'd question the staff there as well—" The people on the couch were gazing up at her expectantly. "Is this the entire night shift?"

"The whole kitten's caboodle," Pleshette assured her.

Konstantin looked around. It was a small lobby, no hiding places, and presumably, no secret doors. Small, drab, and depressing—after waiting here for even just a few minutes, any AR would look great by comparison. She turned back to the people on the couch just as the one in the middle stood up and stuck out his hand. "Miles Mank," he said in a hearty tenor.

Konstantin hesitated. The man's eyes had an unfocused, watery look to them she associated with people who weren't well. He towered over her by six inches and outweighed her by at least a hundred pounds. But they were fairly soft pounds, packed into a glossy blue one-piece uniform that, combined with those gooey eyes and his straw-colored hair, gave him a strangely childlike appearance. She shook his hand. "What's your job here?"

"Supervisor. Well, unofficial supervisor," he added, the strange eyes looking past her at Guilfoyle Pleshette. "I'm the one who's been here the longest so I'm always telling everybody else how things work."

"So go ahead, Miles," Pleshette said, her voice flat. The kimono sleeves snapped like pennants in a high wind as she stretched out her arms and refolded them. "Say it—that if they promoted from within here, *you'd* be night manager. Then I can explain how they had to go on a talent search for an *experienced* administrator. It'll all balance out."

"Nobody ever *died* while *I* was acting night manager," Miles Mank said huffily.

"Yeah, that's true—everybody survived that riot where the company had to refund all the customers. But nobody died so that made it all good-deal-well-done."

Miles Mank strode past Konstantin to loom over Pleshette, who had to reach up to shake her bony finger in his face. Konstantin felt that panicky chill all authorities felt when a situation was about to slip the leash. Before she could order Mank to stop arguing with Pleshette, the mustached officer tugged her sleeve and showed her a taser set on flash. "Shall I?"

Konstantin glanced at her nameplate. "Sure, Wolski, go ahead." She stepped back and covered her eyes.

The flash was a split-second heat that she found oddly comforting, though no one else did. Besides Guilfoyle Pleshette and Miles Mank, Wolski had also failed to warn her fellow officer, the other two employees, or Taliaferro, who had chosen that moment to step back inside. The noise level increased exponentially.

"Everybody shut up!" Konstantin yelled; to her surprise, everybody did. She looked around. All the people in the lobby except for herself and Wolski had their hands over their eyes. It looked like a convention of see-no-evil monkeys.

"I'm going to screen surveillance footage of the victim's final session in the manager's office, and then interview the rest of the staff," she announced and turned to Taliaferro. "Then I'd like to question anyone who was in the same module and scenario." She waited but he didn't take his hands from his eyes. "That means I'll be phoning you down the block, partner, to have select individuals escorted to the office." She waited another few seconds. "Understand, Taliaferro?" she added, exasperated.

"Let me do some prelims on the customers," he said, speaking to the air where he thought she was. He was off by two feet. "They're gonna be getting restless while you're doing that. We're going to have to give them phone calls and pizza as it is."

Konstantin rolled her eyes. "So *give* them phone calls and pizza." She turned back to Pleshette. "Now, can you show me to your office?"

"Who, me?" asked Miles Mank. "I'm afraid I don't have one. I've been making do with the employee lounge."

"Suffer, Mank," Pleshette said, peeking between her fingers. "No one was talking to *you*." She started to lower her hands and then changed her mind.

Konstantin sighed. Their vision would return to normal in a few minutes, along with their complexions, assuming none of them suffered from light-triggered skin-rashes. Perhaps she should have been more sympathetic, but she didn't think any of them would notice if she were.

She put her hand on Guilfoyle Pleshette's left arm. "Now, your office?"

"I'll show you," said Pleshette, "if I ever see well enough again."

Pleshette's office was smaller than the smelly cubicle where the kid had died, which was probably a good thing. It meant that Konstantin didn't throw anything breakable against the wall when she discovered the so-called surveillance footage was an AR log and not a live-action recording of the kid's murder. There would have been no point to throwing anything; unlike the living room where she and her ex had had their final argument, there wasn't enough distance to make a really satisfying smash.

She settled in to watch the video, every moment, including the instructional lead that told her that the only pov on monitor would be detached observer; she could use the editing option for any close-ups or odd angles, and there was a primer to pull down if she were feeling less than Fellini, or even D.W. Griffith.

How helpful, she thought, freezing the footage before the lead faded into the scenario. How excessively helpful. What was she supposed to do, decide how to edit the footage *before* she watched it?

But of course, she realized; this came under the heading of *Souvenirs*. Footage from your AR romp, video of your friend's wedding, pre-packaged quick-time scenics from a kiosk in the Lima airport for a last-minute gift before you boarded the flight home—you made it look however you wanted it to look. To whomever happened to be looking, of course. Maybe you didn't want it to look the same to everyone—a tamer version for one, something experimental to hold another's attention.

Konstantin tapped the menu line at the bottom of the screen. *Options?* it asked her, fanning them out in the center of a deep blue background. *Pick a card, any card,* she thought; *memorize it and slip it back into the deck. There'll be a quiz later, if you survive.* After a moment, she chose *No Frills*.

The image on the screen liquified and melted away into black. A moment later, she was looking at an androgynous face that suggested the best of India and Japan in combination. The name came up as Shantih Love, which she couldn't decide if she hated or not; the linked profile informed her that the Shantih Love appearance was as protected by legal copyright as the name. No age given; under *Sex* it said, *Any; all; why do you care?*

"Filthy job, Shantih, but somebody's got to." She tapped for the technical specs of the session. Full coverage hotsuit, of course; that would tell her when the kid had died. She scrolled past his scenario and module choices to Duration: four hours, twenty minutes. *Yow, kid, that alone could have killed some people.*

She tapped the screen for his vitals so she could note the exact time of death in the archiver. Then she just stared at the figures on the screen, tapping the stylus mindlessly on the desk.

Shantih Love, the specs told her, had shuffled off all mortal coils, artificial and otherwise, just ten minutes into his four-hour-and-twenty-minute romp in post-Apocalyptic Noo Yawk Sitty. It didn't say how he had managed to go on with his romp after he had died. She supposed that was too much to ask.

Shantih Love and the kid powering him/her had both had their throats cut, but for Shantih Love the wound had not been fatal. Disgusting and gory, even uncomfortable, but not fatal.

Konstantin watched the screen intently as the sequence faded in. In the middle of a glitter-encrusted cityscape at dusk, the androgyne made his/her way toward some kind of noisy party or tribal gathering on the rubble-strewn shore of the Hudson River. The rubble was also encrusted with glitter; more glitter twinkled on the glass of the silent storefronts on the other side of a broad, four-lane divided thoroughfare partially blocked by occasional islands of wreckage. As Shantih Love swept off the sidewalk—ankle-length purple robe flowing gracefully with every step—and crossed the ruined street, one of the wrecks ignited, lighting up the semidark. Shantih Love barely glanced at it and kept going, toward the gathering on the shore; Konstantin could hear music and, under that, the white noise of many voices in conversation. What could they possibly have to talk about, she wondered; was it anything more profound than what you'd hear at any other party in any other reality with any other people? And if it were, why did it occur only in the reality of post-Apocalyptic Noo Yawk Sitty?

Shantih Love abruptly looked back in such a way that s/he seemed to be looking directly out of the screen into her eyes. The expression on the unique face seemed somehow both questioning and confident. Konstantin steered the detached perspective from behind Shantih Love around his/her right side, passing in front of the androgyne and moving to the left side, tracking him/her as s/he walked toward the multitude on the shore.

A figure suddenly popped up from behind the low concrete barrier running between the street and the river. Shantih Love stopped for a few moments, uncertainty troubling his/her smooth forehead. Konstantin tried adjusting the screen controls to see the figure better in the gathering darkness but, maddeningly, she couldn't seem to get anything more definite than a fuzzy, blurry silhouette, definitely human-like but otherwise unidentifiable as young or old, male, female, both or neither, friendly or hostile.

The shape climbed over the barrier to the street side just as Shantih Love slipped over it to the shore. The ground here was soft sand and Shantih Love had trouble walking in it. The fuzzy shape paced him/her on the other side of the wall and Konstantin got the idea that it was saying something, but nothing came up on audio. Shantih Love didn't answer, didn't even look in its direction again as s/he moved in long strides toward the crowd, which extended from the water's edge up to a break in the barrier and into the road.

The perspective had slipped back behind Shantih Love. Konstantin tapped the forward button rapidly; now she seemed to be perched on Shantih Love's right shoulder. The gathering on the beach appeared to be nothing more than a ragged, disorganized cocktail party, the sort of thing her ex had loved to attend. Konstantin was disappointed. Was this really all anyone in AR could think of doing?

Shantih Love whirled suddenly; after a one-second delay, the perspective followed. Konstantin felt a wave of dizziness and the images on the screen went out of focus.

When the focus cleared, Konstantin saw that the figure was standing on top of the barrier, poised to jump. Shantih Love backed away, turned, and began stumbling through the party crowd, bumping into various people, some less distinct than others. Konstantin didn't have to shift the perspective around to know that the creature was chasing the androgyne. Now the pov seemed to be a few inches in front of the creature's face; she had a few fast glimpses of bandage-wrapped arms and hands with an indeterminate number of fingers as it staggered into the party after Love.

The pov began to shake and streak, as if it were embedded in the pursuing creature's body. Frustrated, Konstantin pounded on the forward key, but the pov didn't budge. Someone had preordered the pov to this position, she realized. But whether it was the murdered kid who had done it or just the formatting she couldn't tell.

Worse, now that she was in the party crowd, almost every attendee was either so vague as to be maddeningly unidentifiable, or so much a broad type—barbarian, vampire, wild-child, homunculus—that anonymity was just as assured.

Shantih Love broke through the other side of the crowd two seconds before she did, and ran heavily toward a stony rise leading to the sidewalk. S/he scrambled up it on all fours, a heartbeat ahead of the pursuer.

Love vaulted the low barrier and ran along the middle of the street, looking eagerly at each wreck. There were more wrecks here, some ablaze, some not. Something moved inside each one, even those that were burning. Konstantin realized she was probably alone in finding that remarkable; living in a bonfire was probably the height of AR chic.

She tried pushing the pov ahead again and gained several feet. Shantih Love looked over his/her shoulder, seemingly right at the pov. The androgyne's expression was panic and dismay; in the next moment, s/he fell.

The pov somersaulted; there was a flash of broken pavement, followed by a brief panorama of the sky, a flip and a close-up of the androgyne's profile just as the pursuer pushed his/her chin up with one rag-wrapped hand. Perfect skin stretched taut; the blade flashed and disappeared as it turned sideways to slash through flesh, tendon, blood vessels, bone.

The blood flew against the pov and dripped downward, like gory drops of rain on a window. Konstantin winced and pressed to try to erase the blood trails; nothing happened.

Shantih Love coughed and gargled at the sky, not trying to twist away from the bandaged hand that still held his/her chin. Blood pulsed upward in an exaggerated display of blood spurting from a major artery. The creature pushed Love's face to one side, away from the camera, and bent its head to drink.

Konstantin had seen similar kinds of things before in videos, including the so-called killer video that had supposedly been circulating underground (whatever *that* meant these days) and had turned out to be so blatantly phony that the perpetrators should have gone down for fraud.

But where the blood spilled in that and numerous other videos had looked more like cherry syrup or tomato puree, this looked real enough to make Konstantin gag. She put a hand over her mouth as she froze the screen and turned away, trying to breathe deeply and slowly through her nose, willing her nausea to fade. At the same time, she was surprised at herself. Her squeamish streak was usually conveniently dormant; in twelve years as a detective, she had seen enough real-time blood and gore that she could say she was somewhat hardened. Shantih Love's real-time counterpart—secret identity? veneer person?—had certainly bled enough to make anyone choke.

But there was something about this—the blood or the noises coming from Shantih Love, the sound of the creature drinking so greedily. Or maybe just the sight of such realistic blood activating the memory of that smell in the cubicle, that overpowering stench; that smell and the sight of the dead kid stripped of everything, skinned like an animal.

She collected herself and tried jabbing fast-forward to get through the vampiric sequence as quickly as possible. It only made everything more grotesque, so she took it back to normal just at the point where both the creature and the blood vanished completely.

Startled, Konstantin rewound and ran it again in slo-mo, just to make sure she'd seen it right. She had; it wasn't a fast fade-out or the twinkling deliquescence so favored by beginning cinematography students, but a genuine popper which usually happened by way of a real-time equipment failure or power-out. Common wisdom had it that the jump from AR to real-time in such an event was so abrupt as to produce extreme reactions of an undesirable nature—vertigo, projectile vomiting, fainting, or, worse, all three, which could be fatal if you happened to be alone.

Or a slashed throat, if you happened to be not alone with the wrong per-

son, Konstantin thought, trying to rub the furrows out of her brow.

She repeated the sequence once more, and then again in slo-mo, watching the blood disappear right along with the creature, leaving Shantih Love behind. Konstantin called up the record of the kid's vitals and found that, as she had expected, they had quit registering at the moment the blood had disappeared.

Konstantin took her finger off the pause button and let the action go forward. On the screen, the Shantih Love character sat up, its elegant fingers feeling the ragged edges and flaps of skin where its throat had been cut, mild annoyance deepening the few lines in its face. As Konstantin watched it trying to pinch the edges of skin together, she was aware that she was now thinking of the kid's AR persona as a thing rather than a human.

Presumed "it" until proven human? Konstantin frowned. So what was driving *it* now, anyway—a robot, or a very human hijacker?

She could watch video for the next three hours and see if anything would become clearer to her; instead, she decided to talk to people she was reasonably sure were human before taking in any more adventures of a dead kid's false face pretending to be alive in a city pretending to be dead.

If the office had seemed cramped before, Miles Mank made it look even smaller by taking up at least half of it. When it became obvious that he actually knew next to nothing, Konstantin tried to get rid of him quickly, but he kept finding conversational hooks that would get her attention and then lead her along to some meaningless and boring point, at which he wouldn't so much conclude as change the subject and do it all over again. She was finally able to convince him that he was desperately needed at the parking lot to help sort out the clientele with her bewildered partner. Then she prayed that Taliaferro wouldn't use a similar excuse to send him back to her. She still didn't like his eyes.

The first of the other two employees was a silver-haired kid named Tim Mezzer, who was about the same age as the murder victim. He had the vaguely puzzled, preoccupied look of ex-addicts who had detoxed recently by having their blood cleansed. Officially, it was a fast way out of an expensive jones. In fact, it made the high better on relapse.

"How long have you worked here?" Konstantin asked him.

"Three days." He sounded bored.

"And what do you do?" she prodded when he didn't say anything more.

"Oh, I'm a specialist," he said, even more bored. "I specialize in picking up everybody's smelly 'suit when they're done and get 'em cleaned." Mezzer put a plump elbow on the desk and leaned forward. "Tell the truth—you'd kill to have a job like that instead of the boring shit you do."

Konstantin wasn't sure he was really being sarcastic. "Sometimes. Did you know the victim?"

"Dunno. What was his name?"

"Shantih Love."

Mezzer grunted. "Good label. Must have cost him to come up with one that good. Sounds a little like an expensive female whore-assassin, but still pretty good. Someday I'll be rich enough to be able to afford a tailor-made label."

Konstantin was only half-listening while she prodded the archiver for the victim's reference file. "Ah, here we are. Real name is—" she stopped. "Well, that *can't* be right."

"Don't be so sure." Mezzer yawned. "What's it say?"

"Tomoyuki Iguchi," Konstantin said slowly, as if she had to sound out each syllable.

"Ha. Sounds like he was working on turning Japanese in a serious way."

"Why?"

"Well, for post-Apocalyptic Tokyo, of course." Mezzer sighed. "What else?"

"There's a post-Apocalyptic Tokyo now?" Konstantin asked suspiciously.

"Not yet." Mezzer's sigh became a yawn. "Coming soon. Supposed to be the next big hot spot. They say it's gonna make the Sitty look like Sunday in Nebraska, with these parts you can access only if you're Japanese, or a convincing simulation. It's the one everybody's been waiting for."

Konstantin wondered if he knew that something very like it had already come and gone a good many years before either of them had been born. "How about you?" she asked him. "Is it the one you've been waiting for?"

"I don't know from Japanese. I'm an Ellay boy. Got all those gorgeous celebs you can beat up in street gangs. But the bubble-up on this is, there's some kinda secret coming-attraction subroutines for post-Apocalyptic Tokyo buried in the Noo Yawk, Hong Kong, and Ellay scenes and no non-Japanese can crack them. *If* they're really there. Shantih Love musta thought they were."

"But why would he take *two* fake names?" Konstantin wondered, more to herself.

"Told you—he was trying to turn Japanese. He wanted anyone who stripped his label to find his Japanese name underneath and take him for that. Invite him into the special Japan area." Mezzer put his head back as if he were going to bay at the moon and yawned once again. "Or he was getting that crazy-head. You know, where you start thinking it's real in there and fake out here, or you can't tell the difference. You need to talk to Body. Body'll know. Body's probably the only one who'd know for sure."

"What body?"

"Body Sativa. Body knows more about the top ten ARs than anyone else, real or not."

Konstantin felt her mouth twitch. "Don't you mean Cannabis Sativa?" she asked sarcastically.

Mezzer blinked at her in surprise. "Get *off*. Cannibal's her mother. She's good, but Body's the real Big Dipper." He smiled. "Pretty win, actually, that somebody like you'ud know about Cannibal Sativa. Were you goin' in to talk to her?"

Konstantin didn't know what to say.

"Go see Body, I swear she's the one you want. I'll give you some icons you can use in there. Real insider icons, not what they junk you up with in the help files."

"Thanks," Konstantin said doubtfully. "But I think I fell down about a mile back. If he was turning Japanese, as you put it, why would he call himself Shantih Love?"

Mezzer blinked. "Well, because he was tryin' to be a *Japanese* guy named Shantih Love." He frowned at her. "You just don't ever go in AR, do you?"

"Can't add to that," said the other employee cheerfully. She was an older woman named Howard Ruth with natural salt-and-pepper hair and lines in a soft face untouched by chemicals or surgery. Konstantin found her comforting to look at. "Body Sativa's the best tip you're gonna get. You'll go through that whole bunch in the lot down the street and you won't hear anything more helpful." She sat back, crossing her left ankle over her right knee.

"Body Sativa wouldn't happen to be in that group, by any chance?"

Howard Ruth shrugged. "Doubt it. This is just another reception site on an AR network. Considering the sophisticated moves Body makes, she's most likely on from some singleton station, and that could be anywhere."

"Come on," said Konstantin irritably, "even *I* know everyone online has an origin code."

Howard Ruth's smile was sunny. "You haven't played any games lately, have you?"

Konstantin was thinking the woman should talk to her ex. "Online? No."

"No," agreed the woman, "because if you had, you'd know that netgaming isn't considered official net communication or transaction, so it's not governed by FCC or FDSA regulations. Get on, pick a name or buy a permanent label, stay as long as you like—or can afford—and log out when you've had enough. Netgaming is one hundred percent elective, so anything goes—no guidelines, no censorship, no crimes against persons. You can't file a complaint against anyone for assault, harassment, fraud, or anything like that."

Konstantin sighed. "I didn't know this. Why not?"

"You didn't have to." Howard Ruth laughed. "Look, officer—"

"Lieutenant."

"Sure, lieutenant. Unless you netgame regular, you *won't* know any of this. You ever hear about the case years back where a guy used an origin line to track down a woman in realtime and kill her?"

"No," said Konstantin with some alarm. "Where did this happen?"

"Oh, back east somewhere. D.C., I think, or some place like that. Life is so cheap there, you know. Anyway, what happened was, back when they had origin lines in gaming, this guy got mad at this woman, somehow found her by way of her origin line, and boom—lights out. That was one of the first cases of that gameplayer's madness where someone could prove it could be a real danger offline. After that, there was a court ruling that since gaming was strictly recreational, gamers were entitled to complete privacy if they wanted. No origin line. Kinda the same thing for fraud and advertising."

Konstantin felt her interest, which had started to wane with the utterance *D.C.*, come alive again. "What?"

"Guy ran a game-within-a-game on someone. I can't remember exactly what it was—beachfront in Kansas, diamond mines in Peru, hot stocks about to blow. Anyhow, the party of the second part got the idea it was all backed up in realtime and did this financial transfer to the party of the first part, who promptly logged out and went south. Party of the second part hollers *Thief!* and what do you know but the police catch this salesperson of the year. Who then claims that it was all a game and he thought the money was just a gift."

"And?" said Konstantin.

"And that's a wrap. Grand jury won't even indict, on grounds of extreme gullibility. As in, 'You were in *artificial reality,* you fool, what did you expect?' Personally, I think they were both suffering from a touch of the galloping headbugs."

Konstantin was troubled. "And that decision stood?"

"It's *artificial* reality—you can't lie, no matter what you say. It's all make-believe, let's-pretend, the play's the thing." Howard Ruth laughed heartily. "You choose to pay somebody out here for time in there, that's *your* hotspot. Life is so strange, eh?"

Konstantin made a mental note to check for court rulings on AR as she pressed for a clean page in the archiver. "But if being in an AR makes people insane. . ."

"Doesn't make *everyone* insane," the woman said. "That's what it is, you know. The honey factory don't close down just because you're allergic to bee stings."

Konstantin was still troubled. "So when did those things happen?" she asked, holding the stylus ready.

"I don't know," Howard Ruth said, surprised at the question. "Oughta be in the police files, though. Doesn't law enforcement have some kind of central-national-international bank you all access? Something like *Police Blotter?"*

"In spite of the name," Konstantin said, speaking slowly so the woman couldn't possibly misunderstand, *"Police Blotter* is actually a commercial net-magazine, and not affiliated with law enforcement in any official way. But yes, we do have our own national information center. *But* I need to know some kind of key fact that the search program can use to hunt down the information I want—a name, a date, a location." She paused to see if any of this was forthcoming. The other woman only shrugged.

"Well, sorry I can't be of more help, but that's all I know." She got up and stretched, pressing her hands into the small of her back. "If anyone knows more, it's Body Sativa."

"Body Sativa," said the first customer interviewee. He was an aging child with green hair and claimed his name was Earl O'Jelly. "Nobody knows more. Nobody and *no body*. If you get what I mean."

Konstantin didn't bury her face in her hands. The aging child volunteered the information that he had been in the crowd by the Hudson that Shantih Love had staggered through, but claimed he hadn't seen anything like what she described to him.

Neither had the next one, a grandmother whose AR alter-ego was a twelve-year-old boy-assassin named Nick the Schick. "That means I technically have to have 'the' as my middle name, but there's worse, and stupider as well," she told Konstantin genially. "Nick knows Body, of course. *Everybody* knows Body. And vice versa, probably. Actually, I think Body Sativa's just a database that got crossed with a traffic-switcher and jumped the rails."

"Pardon?" Konstantin said, not comprehending.

The grandmother was patient. "You know how files get cross-monkeyed? Just the thing—traffic-switcher was referencing the database in a thunderstorm, maybe sunspots, and they got sort of arc-welded. Traffic-switcher interface mutated from acquired characteristics from all the database entries. That's what *I* say, and *nobody's* proved yet that *that* couldn't happen. Or *didn't."* She nodded solemnly.

Konstantin opened her mouth to tell the woman that if she understood her correctly, what she was describing was akin to putting a dirty shirt and a pile of straw in a wooden box for spontaneous generation of mice and then decided against it. For one thing, she wasn't sure that she had understood correctly and for another, the shirt-and-straw method of creating mice was probably routine in AR.

There was no third interviewee. Instead, an ACLU lawyer came in and explained that since the crime had occurred in the real world, and all the so-called witnesses had been in AR, they weren't actually witnesses at all, and could not be detained any longer. However, all of their names would be available on the video parlor's customer list, which Konstantin could see as soon as she produced the proper court order.

"In the meantime, everyone agrees you ought to talk to this Body Sativa, whatever she is," the lawyer said, consulting a palmtop. "Assuming she'll give you so much as the time of day without legal representation."

"I suppose I need a court order for that, too," Konstantin grumbled.

"Not hardly. AR is open to anyone who wants to access it. Even you, Officer Konstantin." The lawyer grinned, showing diamond teeth. "Just remember the rules of admissibility. Everything everyone tells you in AR—"

"—is a lie, right. I got the short course tonight already." Konstantin's gaze strayed to the monitor, now blank. "I think I'll track this Body Sativa down in person and question her in realtime."

"Only if she voluntarily tells you who she is out here," the lawyer reminded her a bit smugly. "Otherwise, her privacy is protected."

"Maybe she'll turn out to be a good citizen," Konstantin mused. "Maybe she'll care that some seventeen-year-old kid got his throat cut."

The lawyer's smug expression became a sad smile. "Maybe. *I* care. *You* care. But there's no law that says anyone else has to."

"I know, and I'd be afraid if there was. Even so—" Konstantin frowned. "I do wish I didn't have to depend so much on volunteers."

She sent DiPietro and Celestine over to the dead kid's apartment building, though she wasn't expecting much. If he was typical, his neighbors would have barely been aware of him. Most likely, they would find he had been yet another gypsy worker of standard modest skills, taking temporary assignments via a city-run agency to support his various habits. Including his AR habit.

Just to be thorough, she waited in Guilfoyle Pleshette's office for the call letting her know that the other two detectives had found a generic one-room apartment with little in the way of furnishings or other belongings to distinguish it from any other generic one-room apartment in the city. Except for the carefully organized card library of past AR experiences in the dustless, static-free, moisture- and fire-proof non-magnetic light-shielded container. Every heavy AR user kept a library, so that no treasured moment could be lost to time.

The library would go to headquarters to be stored for the required ten-day waiting period while a caseworker tried to track down next-of-kin. If none turned up, the card library would then be accessed by an automated program designed to analyze the sequences recorded on each card and construct a profile of the person, which would then be added to the online obituaries. Usually this would cause someone who had known the deceased to come forward; other times, it simply confirmed that there was no one to care.

The idea came unbidden to Konstantin, derailing the semidoze she had slipped into at whatever indecent A.M. the night had become. She plugged the archiver into the phone and sent the retriever to fetch data on the other seven AR DOAs.

Delivery was all but immediate—at this time of night, there wasn't much data traffic. Konstantin felt mildly annoyed that DiPietro and Celestine couldn't report in just as quickly. Perhaps they had taken the stringer with them and were even now playing to the cam in an inspection of the dead kid's apartment.

A bit of heartburn simmered in her chest; she imagined it was her blood pressure going up a notch. According to *The Law Enforcement Officers' Guide To A Healthy, Happy Life (ON & OFF The Job!)*, sex was the number one stress reliever. The *Guide* had most likely meant the sort that involved one other person, Konstantin reflected and pushed away thoughts of her ex to survey the data arranging itself on the archiver's small but hi-res screen.

The first to suffer a suspicious death while in post-Apocalyptic Noo Yawk Sitty had been a thirty-four-year-old woman named Sally Lefkow. Her picture showed a woman so pale as to seem faded. She had passed most of her realtime hours as a third-rank senior on a Minneapolis janitorial team whose contract had included both the building where she had lived and the building where she had died. Konstantin wasn't sure whether to be amused, amazed, or alarmed that her online persona had been an evolved dragon; eight feet tall and the color of polished antique copper, it had been bi-sexual, able to switch at will. Sally Lefkow had died of suffocation; the evolved dragon had been in flight when it had suddenly fallen out of the sky into the East River, and never come up.

Konstantin put the dead woman's realtime background next to the information on the dragon to compare them but found she was having trouble retaining anything. "In one eye and out the other," she muttered, then winced. *Lover, come back. You forgot to take the in-jokes along with the rest of the emotional baggage.*

She marked the Lefkow-dragon combo and went on to the next victim, a twenty-eight-year-old gypsy office worker named Emilio Torres. Konstantin thought he looked more like an athlete. Or maybe an ex-athlete. He had died alone in his Portland apartment during an online session as—Konstantin blinked—Marilyn Presley. Even Konstantin had heard of Marilyn Presley. The hybrid had been an online flash-fad, hot for a day, passé forever after. But not, apparently, for Torres. He had persisted as Marilyn for six weeks, long after the rest of the flash followers had lost interest, and he had died—Konstantin blinked again—of an overdose of several drugs; the Marilyn Presley persona had gone inert in the middle of some sort of gathering that wasn't quite a street brawl but not really an open-air party, either. There was no follow-up on the persona, nothing to tell Konstantin if the rights to it had been acquired by someone else since.

Torres had died a month after Lefkow and half a continent away. The next death had occurred two months later, in a cheesy beachside parlor in New Hampshire. Marsh Kuykendall had been unembarrassed by his status as an AR junkie, supporting his habit with odd and mostly menial jobs. *Acquaintances of the victim have all heard him say, at one time or another, that realtime was the disposable reality because it could not be preserved or replayed like AR,* Konstantin read. *"AR is humanity's true destiny." "In AR, everyone is immortal."*

If you don't mind existing in reruns, she thought. Kuykendall had owned a half dozen personas, all of them his original creations. Mortality had caught up with him while he had been acting out a panther-man fantasy. The panther-man had been beaten to death by some vaguely monstrous assailant that no one claimed to have seen clearly; in realtime, Kuykendall had taken blows hard enough to shatter both his head-mounted helmet and his head. No one in the parlor had heard or seen anything.

Victim number four had been in rehab for a year after a bad accident had left her paralyzed. Lydia Stang's damaged nerves had been regenerated, but she had had to relearn movement from the bottom up. AR had been part of her therapy; her AR persona had been an idealized gymnastic version of herself. She had died with a broken neck, in AR and in realtime. Witnesses stated she had been fighting a street duel with a lizard-person. Even better, the lizard-person had voluntarily come forward and admitted to AR contact with the deceased. Stang had been online in Denver, while the lizard person had been cavorting in a parlor not three blocks from where Konstantin was sitting. She double-checked to be sure she had that right, and then made a note to look up the lizardperson in real-time, if possible.

A moment later she was scratching that note out; the lizard-person was victim number five. Even more shocking, Konstantin thought, was the lack of information on the deceased, a former musician who had gone by the single name Flo. After Lydia Stang's death, Flo had given up music and taken up AR full-time, or so it seemed, until someone had suffocated her. Online, her reptilian alter-ego had been swimming. In the East River, Konstantin noted, which the Lefkow dragon had fallen into out of the sky. Maybe that meant something; maybe it didn't.

Victims six and seven would seem to have killed each other in a gang fight. Konstantin found this disheartening. In post-Apocalyptic Noo

Yawk Sitty, they had been a couple of nasty street kids, sixteen, just on the verge of adulthood. In real-time, they had been a pair of middle-aged gypsy office workers who had no doubt discovered that they had wandered into the cul de sac of life and weren't going to find their way out alive. They had both lived in a nearby urban hive, got assignments through the same agency, did the same kinds of no-brainer files and data upkeep jobs—and yet, they apparently hadn't known each other offline. Or if they had known each other, they had deliberately stayed away from each other. Except online, where they had often mixed it up. They had stabbed each other in AR but someone else had stabbed each of them in the privacy of their own homes. The times of death seemed to be in some dispute.

And now here was number eight, a weird Caucasian kid with a Japanese name. *Domo arigato,* Konstantin thought sourly, and pressed for a summary of the common characteristics of each case.

There wasn't much, except for the fact that each murder had occurred while the victim had been online in post-Apocalyptic Noo Yawk Sitty. Three of the previous murders had taken place locally; the kid's brought it up to four, fully half. And unless it turned out that the kid had been a brain surgeon, all of them had been lower level drones, not a professional in the bunch.

She sat back and tried to think. Was serial murder back in style—*again?* Except whoever had been enjoying the pretend-murder of hijacking someone else's AR persona had decided to cross over? Or couldn't tell the difference?

Konstantin pressed for a table of similarities among the AR characters and came up with a *Data Not Available* sign. The note on the next screen told her there had been no work done in this area, either due to lack of software, lack of time, or lack of personnel. Undoubtedly no one had thought that it was particularly important to look into the AR personae—it wasn't as if those were actual victims . . . were they? For all she or anyone else knew, Sally Lefkow's dragon would be more missed and mourned than Sally herself; likewise for the rest of them.

Sad, and somehow predictable, Konstantin thought. She made a note to send out for more background on the victims. While she was reviewing what information she had, DiPietro and Celestine called to tell her mostly what she had already known, except for one very surprising difference: upon arrival at the kid's apartment, they had found a nineteen-year-old woman in the process of ransacking the place. She would answer no questions except to say that she was the kid's wife.

Konstantin checked quickly; as she had thought, the kid was the only—or the first—married victim. "Bring her down here," she told them. "Fast."

"Tommie was looking for the out door," said Pine Havelock. "Anybody was gonna find it, it would be him. And now look what's gone and happened." Tomoyuki Iguchi's self-proclaimed wife was sitting in a plastic bucket of a chair hugging her folded legs tightly and staring at Konstantin over the bony humps of her knees with a half-afraid, half-accusing expression. Dressed in what looked like surplus hospital pajamas, she seemed to be completely hairless, without even eyelashes. Her eyes weren't really large enough to carry it off; she made Konstantin think of a mental patient who had fallen into a giant vat of depilatory cream.

"What out door would that be?" Konstantin asked her after a long moment of silence. "The one to the secret Japanese area?"

Havelock raised her head, staring oddly. "Get off."

"What out door?" Konstantin asked patiently, suppressing several inappropriate responses.

"Out. *Out.* Where you go and you'll stay. So you don't come back to something like *this."* She looked around Guilfoyle Pleshette's office.

"Uh-huh." Konstantin leaned an elbow on the desk and rubbed her forehead. "Where *would* you end up?"

"Out." The woman's forehead puckered in spots; Konstantin realized she was frowning. Without eyebrows, all of her expressions were odd. "You know—*out.* Where you don't need the suit or the top hat, because you're *there.* Not *here."*

Konstantin finally got it. "So you and Iguchi were looking for the magic door to the egress. Did you know of anyone else—"

"Egress," Havelock said, nodding vigorously. "That's it. Door out—egress. *That's* what *she* called it."

"Who?" Konstantin asked, and then almost said the answer with her.

"Body Sativa."

"Sun's gonna come up," Guilfoyle Pleshette said threateningly. She looked tired. Even her hair was starting to lose its lift.

Still sitting at her desk in the minuscule office, Konstantin waved at her impatiently. "Sorry, Taliaferro," she said into the phone while she scrawled notes in the archiver one-handed. "I didn't get the last thing you said. Repeat."

Taliaferro was surprisingly patient. Perhaps lack of sleep had simply made a zombie out of him. "I said, they're still running data on the other seven so we don't have anything solid yet. But the probability is running to 80 percent that anyone who frequented the Sitty as often as any of them would, at some point, have had AR contact with the persona or entity known as Body Sativa."

" 'Entity'?" said Konstantin incredulously. "Who's calling this thing an *entity?* The probability program or someone who's in a position to know?"

"Actually, I heard some of the clientele in the parking lot calling it that. Or her. Whatever." Taliaferro sounded a bit sheepish. "Probably it's some slicko with a lot of good pr. Famous for being famous, you know."

"You do much AR?" Konstantin asked him suddenly.

There was a moment of loud silence. "Is that a sincere question?"

"Sorry," Konstantin said. "Don't know what got into me."

Taliaferro hung up without replying. She turned to Guilfoyle Pleshette, who was yawning hugely and noisily. "Do *you* do much AR?"

"Yeah, sure. Employee discount here's pretty good."

"Do you spend much time in post-Apocalyptic Noo Yawk Sitty?"

Now the manager shrugged and looked at the ceiling almost coyly. "I guess I been known to. You gotta scan rated zone because when you get a virgin in, you gotta talk about what you know. I say that's the difference between a quality business and a ditch."

Konstantin nodded absently. Once a place got too popular, nobody would admit to going voluntarily, even in AR. "And Body Sativa?"

Pleshette shrugged one shoulder. "Everybody knows about her, but not as many really seen her as say so."

"But you have," Konstantin said.

"Of course."

Of course. Konstantin managed not to smile. "You think you could introduce me?"

"Of course *not*." The woman was almost offended.

Now Konstantin shrugged. "It was worth a try."

"You got to understand here that anyone who knows Body and drags along every prole that wants to see her, won't know her for too long."

"I guess I can understand that. Suppose I go in and find her myself?"

Pleshette stared at her. "You think you can?"

"One of your employees offered me some secret insider icons. Whatever those are."

The manager straightened up. "Yeah? Who?" she asked sharply.

"The bored one. Mezzer. Tim."

"Oh, him." Pleshette waved one hand. "You can find his so-called secret insider icons in the index of any online guidebook. I got stuff you can get around with."

"But will you loan any to me?"

The funny little face looked doubtful. "What're you gonna do with it?"

Konstantin took a breath. "All I want to do is ask this Body Sativa some questions."

"What kind of questions?" the night manager asked suspiciously.

Now Konstantin felt as if she had fallen through a rabbit hole in time that had sent her back to the beginning of the situation, which she would have to explain all over again. "Questions having to do with the kid who died here tonight—Shantih Love, or Tomoyuki Iguchi, whichever you knew him as."

"I didn't know him at all," said Pleshette. Konstantin felt like screaming. "And there's no insurance that Body Sativa did, either. But if that's all you really want to do, I can load some stuff for you. But you got to promise me, you won't misuse any of it."

"Misuse it how?" Konstantin asked.

"Poaching."

"And what would that entail?"

"Getting stuff you're not entitled to get."

" 'Stuff'? In AR?" Konstantin felt completely lost now.

The night manager folded her arms again. "Yeah. Stuff in AR. In the Sitty. Everybody who goes in regular's got stuff in AR. So I got this nothing job. I got to put up with blowfish like Miles Mank. I live in a hive on Sepulveda. But I got stuff in AR. I got a good place for myself, I'm in the game with the name and the fame. I even got myself a few passwords. I put in plenty of time to get all that. I don't want it just slipped out from under me when I'm not there to defend it." The funny little face started to pucker unhappily. "You got stuff out here, you don't need to go poachin' my stuff in there. If you see what I mean."

Konstantin saw; it sent a wave of melancholy through her. "All I want to do is contact Body Sativa if I can. I don't want to do anything else."

Pleshette held her gaze for a long moment and then shrugged her bony shoulders hugely. "Yeah. Well, you know, it's not like I can't tell the difference between in there and out here, it's not like I think I can put that stuff in a bank or anything. But I put a lot of time in; I spent some big sums doin' it. If I give it away, then I got *nothing*. You see that?"

Konstantin saw. She couldn't decide, however, if it was the sort of thing a person might kill for.

Guilfoyle Pleshette found a clean hotsuit in Konstantin's size and helped her put it on, giving her a flurry of instructions in her little cartoony voice. Konstantin felt silly, even though she knew this was really just like any other information gathering operation, except it was more like using the telephone. Unless what happened to the kid happened to her, she thought unhappily.

Tim Mezzer made good on his promise to supply icons and loaded the file into the headmount for her. "All you have to do is ask for your icon cat," he said, sounding less bored. "And if you're not sure which icon to try, ask for advice."

"Ask who?"

"The icons," he said, looking at her as if she should have known this. "They all have their own help files attached. But I gotta tell you, they're all pretty idiosyncratic, too. You know how it is, what *some* people call help."

Konstantin was mildly alarmed to find that she actually understood what he was telling her. After loading her own information into the headmount, Pleshette took her to one of the deluxe cubicles—deluxe meaning it was half again as large and included an extra chair. She helped Konstantin get comfortable in it, fastened the straps just tightly enough to keep her from falling if she got overly energetic, and fitted her headmount for her. Konstantin tried to thank her, but the headmount muffled her too well. She felt more than heard the woman leave the room. Fear rippled through her, briefly but intensely, making her dizzy.

Then the screen lit up with a control panel graphic and she immediately regained her balance. She turned on the log. The log was an independent, outside operation with only an on-off access, so she'd have her own record that she could prove hadn't been tampered with later, if necessary. Funny how the first thing anyone had to do with taped evidence was prove that it hadn't been toasted, she thought.

The control panel graphic disappeared and the screen showed her the configuration menu. She made her choices—sighting graphic and help line on request—while the 'suit warmed up. This was a full-coverage 'suit, she realized, uncomfortable. Somehow, she hadn't given it any thought when she was putting it on and it was too late to do anything about it now. Besides, they were probably all full-coverage 'suits; full-coverage would be the big attraction in a place like this. As if to confirm her thoughts, a hotsuit ad replaced the configuration menu.

Because if you're not going to feel it all over, murmured a congenial female voice while a hotsuit, transparent to show all the sensors, revolved on the screen, *why bother?* Which, when you thought about it, wasn't such an unreasonable question.

The headmounted monitor adjusted the fine-tuning for her focal length by showing her the standard introduction in block letters on a background of shifting colors. Konstantin sighed impatiently. So much introductory material with the meter running—she could see the clock icon tagging along at the upper edge of her peripheral vision on the right side. You probably couldn't go broke operating a video parlor, she thought, unless you tried real, real hard.

The sign came up so suddenly that it took at least three seconds to register on her, and even then she wasn't sure right away whether she was really seeing it, or imagining it. Seeing in AR felt strangely too close to thinking.

WELCOME TO THE LAND OF ANYTHING GOES
HERE THERE ARE NO RULES
EVERYTHING IS PERMITTED

Ha, thought Konstantin.

You can choose to be totally anonymous.
You can tell the whole truth about yourself.
You can tell only lies.

The word *lies* flashed on and off in different colors before it evaporated.

No real crime is possible here. If you do something Out There as a result of events In Here, you are on your own. In the event of your persona's virtual death, you can request to be directed to central stores, where you can choose another. The time used in choosing a new persona or performing any reference or maintenance task is not *free, though a reduced rate may be available through your parlor operator. Consult the rate file in your personal area for more information.*

Konstantin looked around for a speed-scroll option.

There is no speed-scroll option for this portion of your session. State and federal law specifically declare that all users must be advised of conditions in the gaming area. By reading this, you agree that you understand the structure and accept any charges, standard and/or extra, that you will incur at your point of origin. Closing your eyes will only result in a full rescroll of the introductory material, at your own expense.

Blink-rate and eye-movements could reveal a great deal about a person's thoughts, especially when used in conjunction with vital signs, Konstantin remembered, feeling even more uneasy.

This concludes the introductory material. The next screen will be your destination menu. Bon voyage, and good luck.

The screen that came up showed her four doors labeled *Post-Apocalyptic Noo Yawk Sitty, Post-Apocalyptic Ellay, Post-Apocalyptic Hong Kong,* and *Others.*

A small bright icon appeared at the bottom right corner of her visual field, a graphic of a hand twisting a doorknob. Just below it, on the status line, was the word *Cue!* Feeling awkward, she reached for the Noo Yawk Sitty door and saw a generic whitegloved hand moving toward the knob. As the hand touched the knob, she felt it in her own hand, the sensors delivering a sensation to the palm side of her fingers that surprised her with its intense authenticity—it was more like touching a doorknob than actually touching a doorknob.

The next moment was a flash of chaos, a maelstrom of noise and light, countless touches and textures everywhere at once, over before she could react to any of it. Under her feet, she could hear the scrape of the gritty glitz, the glitzy grit of post-Apocalyptic Noo Yawk Sitty; she could see the sparkle and glitter of it spread out before her—not Eliot's etherized patient awaiting dissection but a refulgent feast for her reeling senses.

HINT: In case of disorientation, amp your 'suit down and wait at least thirty seconds before attempting movement. Closing your eyes could result in vertigo. This message will be repeated.

She thought she heard herself make some kind of relieved noise as she stared at the setting marked *decrease.* In a few moments, all the settings on the suit had been re-adjusted to a more bearable level. Whoever had had this 'suit on last, she thought, had either been extremely jaded or suffering from some kind of overall senses-impairment disorder. Or—not so amazing in the era of the more-real-than-real experience—both.

Now that she could perceive her surroundings without being assaulted by them, Konstantin was dismayed to find that she didn't seem to be anywhere near where Shantih Love had died. Instead, she was standing at the edge of an open area in the midst of a crowd of tall buildings festooned with enormous neon signs of a sort that had been popular seventy or eighty years before. Except for herself, there were no people, or at least none that she could see, and no sound except for a faint hum that might have come from the signs, or from some distant machine. Or possibly even from some loose connection in the headmount, she thought sourly. It would be just her luck.

The buildings were dark, showing the scars of fires, bullets, and bomb blasts, broken-out windows gaping like empty eye sockets, but the signs were brilliant, impossibly vivid with shifting colors that melted and morphed like living ropes of molten light. She had to look away or be hypnotized.

Her gaze locked onto a silvery figure standing in an open doorway. At first, she thought it was someone wearing a skintight bio-suit but then the figure moved forward and she saw that its skin was the same color as the clothes it wore. The figure moved closer and she amended her perception: it was the same material as the clothes it wore.

"New in town?" it sang, approaching carefully.

"Maybe," she said, taking a step back.

"Oh, you're new." The figure, which began to look more like it was made of mercury or chrome, gestured at something behind her. Konstantin turned to look.

The sight of the completely hairless and sexless creature in the dark glass made her jump; then embarrassment made her cringe. She had completely forgotten to choose a persona and the hotsuit, rather than choosing one for her, had let her enter AR wearing a placeholder. Her gaze darted around as she searched for the exit icon.

"It's not necessary to leave," the silvery figure said in its musical voice. Now that it was right next to her, Konstantin could see it was a sort of animated metal sculpture of a tall young girl, though she couldn't quite identify the metal. Chrome, mercury, or possibly platinum? "Pull down Central Stores and choose Wardrobe. Then just follow the directions."

"Oh. Thank you so much." Feeling awkward, Konstantin stuck out her hand. "I'm, uh, Dore. And you're right, I'm new here."

The silver girl seemed unaware of her extended hand. "I am a pop-up help-and-guide subroutine keyed to respond to situations and types of situations most often identified with new users of AR and/or post-Apocalyptic Noo Yawk Sitty. I am also available on request. Pull down Help and ask for Sylvia."

Konstantin started to thank her again but the girl made a fast gesture at eye-level and she found herself standing at a shiny white counter. The words *TOUCH HERE FOR ASSISTANCE* faded in on its surface, going from pale pink to blood red and back to pale pink before disappearing. Konstantin gingerly put a fingertip on the spot where she estimated the middle of the O in FOR had been.

"Help you," said a hard-edged male voice; the short, plump man who appeared on the other side of the counter looked as if he were answering a casting call for a play about bank tellers in 1900. The green visor on his forehead cast a shadow that made it hard to see anything of his eyes but reflected pinpoints of light.

"Where's the rest of your hat?" Konstantin asked impulsively.

"This is an eyeshade, not a hat," he replied in that same sharp, almost harsh tone. "Its presence connotes items and equipment available to you in AR, some at a surcharge. Do you want to see a list of items and equipment with their corresponding surcharges? These can also be itemized on the hardcopy printout of your receipt."

"I don't know. Is a persona classified as an item or as equipment?"

"Neither. A persona is a persona. Did you have someone in particular in mind or were you planning construction here? Morphing services within AR are available for a surcharge; however, there is no extra charge if you have brought your own morphing utility with you. Except, of course, for any extra time that might be consumed by the morphing process."

Konstantin suddenly found herself yawning; so far, her big AR adventure was turning out to be even more tiresome than the reality she was used to. "Does anybody really do anything in here besides listen to how much everything is costing them?"

"First-time users are advised to take the orientation sequence, and usually in some easier location." He sounded as bored as she felt.

"I want out of here," she said. "Out of the whole thing, I mean. Exit. End it. Good-bye. Stop. Logging off. Out, out, *out.*"

Abruptly, she was staring at a blank screen; her 'suit was in *Suspend,* she saw, but still turned on. Words began to crawl up the screen in a steady scroll.

Your time in your chosen AR location has been halted. Readings indicate a high level of tension and stress in a low level of situation. Generally this occurs when the user is confused or has not taken proper instruction in the use of AR. Do you wish to continue in AR, or do you wish to terminate the program and exit? Please choose one option and one option only.

She was about to tell it to terminate when she heard what sounded like a telephone ringing.

The words on the screen vanished and a new message appeared quickly, word by word. *Realtime communication with you is being requested.*

Do you want to talk to the caller? Please answer yes or no.

"Who is it?" she asked and then added quickly, "Oh, never mind. Put them on."

There was a click and she heard the familiar cartoony tones of Guilfoyle Pleshette. "What are you doing?"

"I don't know," she said.

"Yeah, what I thought. Icons and passwords don't do you a bit of good if you don't know what you're doing. That's an advanced 'suit I put you in. It doesn't carry a pre-fab for you, you got to bring your own."

"My own what?" asked Konstantin worriedly.

"Your own *persona*. I thought you had one you wanted."

"I do."

"Well, who is it?"

Konstantin took a breath. "Shantih Love."

Pleshette didn't even hesitate. "You want it with or without the cut throat?"

"With," Konstantin said. "Definitely with. And I want a copy of the surveillance footage loaded into a subroutine, too."

"You gonna run a sequence within a sequence?"

"I might. If it looks like it might get me some answers. Why?"

"Because that's a pretty expensive thing to do." Pleshette sounded both annoyed and worried. "Who's gonna pay for all of this online time and fun and games?"

"You are," Konstantin said.

"What?"

"I said, the taxpayers are. Your tax dollars at work."

Pleshette's laugh was low but surprisingly harsh. "Not my tax dollars. I don't pay taxes, not on my salary. You want to impress some taxpayers, catch some criminals in there and drag them out with you when you sign off."

Twenty (billable) minutes later, Konstantin stepped through a doorway onto the street where she had first seen Shantih Love. The feel of the Love persona in her 'suit was pleasurable in a way that kept her on edge. Being Shantih Love was close to seductive, even with the sliced throat, something she had not taken into consideration.

Real easy to go native in a Gang Wars module. Guilfoyle Pleshette's words came to mind unbidden. Not to mention unhelpfully, she thought; this wasn't a Gang Wars module. That she knew of, anyway.

She was wondering now if she really knew anything at all. The piles of wreckage in the street were all aflame, burning in jeweltones, now and then sending sparks skyward, where they seemed to mingle with the stars. The glitter she had seen on the monitor looked somehow less gritty from the inside and more like delicate sprays of tiny lights, too exquisitely fragile not to shatter in a light puff of a breeze, yet remaining, twinkling and shimmering against the black street, the pitted brick and the web-cracked glass of the buildings facing the burning wrecks, the cold-stone texture of the barrier between the street and the alien shore of the Hudson River.

Konstantin went to the barrier and strolled along it in the direction Shantih Love had taken, looking around for anything like the figure of a shaggy beast that might take an interest in her.

Rather than anything approaching, however, Konstantin had a sense of things drawing away from her, many watching with the knowledge that she was an impostor. And then again, she thought suddenly, how would anyone know, if the Shantih Love persona had gone on for another four hours after Iguchi's death? Maybe the only one who knew was the creature who had attacked and hijacked Shantih Love here in the first place.

She paused, leaning on the barrier and looking toward where she estimated the party had been. It was long over now, or perhaps this was no longer a hot place to be in the Sitty. Her purpose here was not to find a party, nor to act as a decoy to attract a creature that wasn't even real. Funny how easy it was to forget things or to keep focused here. If she waited much longer, she might even feel her concentration dissolve, break apart into tiny fragments and float away up to the stars with the sparks from the burning wreckage.

"Icon cat?" she asked.

It was there before her on the barrier, a big book full of symbols and their explanations. The page it was open to showed a flame within a halo; as she looked at it, it went from a line drawing to a vivid holo. The word *Enlightenment* came out of the flame and rippled for a moment. More words appeared on the facing page: *You have only to ask.*

Konstantin made a face, or thought she did; there was no real feeling above her neck. "Is this a help file?" she said aloud.

Now there was a new message on the page opposite the flame: *Help with? __Travel __Location __Contacts __Other*

After a moment's thought, she touched *__Contacts.*

Contact __Who __What? the page wanted to know.

She pressed for *__Who.* The question mark moved to the end of the word. "Body Sativa," she said aloud.

A golden arrow pointing to her right materialized on the page. She turned it and found a map of the area with her own position highlighted. A dotted green line appeared, winding its way along the grid of streets to a location six blocks away; a green star flashed on and off.

"That was easy," she said, noting the address and the directions. It just figured. *You have only to ask.* So simple that it was too simple to think of.

The book disappeared into the back of the map. She picked it up and moved up the street toward the next three-way intersection. Three fiery humanish shapes detached themselves from the burning ruins of a classic Rolls sandwiched between two antique sports cars and stood watching her. Konstantin had a sudden urge to whirl on them and claim she was selling encyclopedias or household cleansers. The idea was a tickle playing over her back, where she imagined she could feel their literally burning stares.

No, too simple; they might expect her to produce chips full of natural history quick-times or a bottle of something that looked like urine and smelled like ammonia. Not that she had smelled anything in here since she had arrived, not even anything burning.

She couldn't account for how she had come up with the idea of playing such a prank; she'd never had much of a sense of humor, or so her ex had always said.

Anything goes. You can even pretend you have a sense of humor, or that your ex isn't actually ex, and all while you look for someone with the improbable name of Body Sativa, or Love, or whatever.

She passed several brawls, a side street where a few hundred people seemed to be trying to stay as close together as possible and still dance—it looked as if they had decided nudity would do it—and a billboard-sized screen where half a dozen people were either collaborating on a quick-time or competing to see whose images could dominate. Someone among them was obsessed with mutant reptiles. Or were certain kinds of images contagious?

Or maybe, she thought as she passed someone that might have been the offspring of a human and a cobra, it was the mutants themselves that were contagious. She paused at a corner in front of a park surrounded by a black metal spiked fence and consulted the map.

"Sssssssssssshhhhhhhhhhhh . . ."

The noise was so soft, she wasn't sure that she had actually heard it. But then it came again, from somewhere in the dark contained in the spiked metal fence, and she found that the sensation of the small hairs standing up on the back of her neck was not necessarily something that the hotsuit had to produce for her.

"Sssssssssssshhhhhhhhhhhhaaaaaaannnnnnntiiiiiiih . . ."

She was clenching her hands so tightly that if she had really been holding a map, it would have crumpled and torn in a dozen places. *Come on,* she told herself. *This is nothing more than a scary story. You just happen to be in it.*

"Sssssssssshhhhhhhhhhaaaaaaaaaannnnnnntiiiiiiiiih . . ."

Apparently it didn't matter what she told herself; the hairs on the back of her neck were going to stand up and jitterbug regardless. The chills seemed to be creeping down her backbone now. Konstantin tried to steel

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herself and shivered instead.

"Ssssssshhhhhhaaaaaaaannnnnnntiiiiiih. Welcome back from the land of the dead. We've been waiting for you, darling."

Konstantin forced herself to turn around. The faces grinning out of the darkness glowed moon-pale, with thick black circles around the eyes, which were also luminous. Or just the whites, anyway, Konstantin noticed, trying to see more detail in spite of the cold still flicking at the back of her neck and up onto her scalp.

As her eyes adjusted, she could see that there were half a dozen of them, in a roughly symmetrical formation around a picnic table with the one who had spoken in the center. They were all wearing black skintights over their idealized hardbodies, some of them indisputably female, others emphatically male. *When Broadway choreographers go bad,* said a tiny, mocking voice in her mind. More chills played over the back of her neck. Shuddering, she rubbed her neck with her free hand and felt the cut area in front separate a bit.

She covered her wounded throat with the map and moved closer to the metal fence. "Do I know you?" she asked, trying to sound calm.

"Shantih," said the one who had been doing all the talking in a sulky tone. Emphatically male, she saw. "After all we've meant to each other. I'm wounded. Mortally. We *all* are."

"And I'm dead," Konstantin answered. "You have any idea who did it?"

The glowing moon-colored face suddenly took on an uncertain expression. "Honey, you were *there.* Look at your footage. Relive every glorious moment."

"I have. I'd invite you to watch it again with me, but I'm on my way to meet someone. Maybe we can connect later."

One of the women on the speaker's right straightened up from her catlike stalking pose and pushed both hands into the small of her back. "Oh, for crying out *loud,* Shantih. My back's *killing* me tonight. If you're not playing, just say so so we can go find somebody else."

"I'm not playing," Konstantin said, starting to turn away.

"Because you're not Shantih," said the speaker, hopping down from the table and going to the fence. "Are you." It wasn't really a question.

Konstantin shook her head. "You knew Shantih Love pretty well?"

The man adjusted something on himself at waist-level and Konstantin felt the chills that had been tormenting her suddenly vanish. " 'Knew'? Does that mean our usual Shantih gave up the character?"

"Gave up the ghost," Konstantin said. "The person you knew as Shantih Love in here has been murdered. For real. I—"

He turned away from her and swung his arm. The group surrounding the picnic table vanished, including the woman who had complained. Then he turned back to her. "What kinda virgin are you, hon?" he asked, annoyance large on his white painted face.

"What kind?" Konstantin echoed, mystified.

"Yeah, *what kind.* Are you some senator's baby out for a good time, or are you some rich kid who bought out a regular? Thought you could get the game and the fame along with the name?"

Konstantin started to answer but he did something at waist-level again and a fresh wave of chills danced up her neck into her hair. Crying out, she stepped back, batting the air with her map as if ultrasonics were insects she could just swat away from herself.

"You stay away from me, you pseudo-rudo," he yelled at her.

"What?" she demanded. "I didn't do anything—"

"I *hate* you virgins, you all think you're the *first* who ever thought of saying the one you bought out got killed for real. You think we're all just gonna lead you to their stash, tell you, 'Oh, help yourself, take all the *stuff,* and if you don't know how to use it, just ask'?" He did something at his waist again and Konstantin retreated several more steps. At the same time, she understood that this should not have made a difference. Unless her 'suit was cooperating in the scenario and producing the ultrasonics—

She shifted her gaze to the control for her 'suit and saw that it *was* giving her the chills. She readjusted the setting and the chills cut off immediately.

The man made a disgusted noise. "For god's sake, baby, if you can't take the sensation, why did you bother coming in?" He flickered out and she was alone. Moving on, Konstantin couldn't decide whether to feel relieved or chastized.

The place marked on the map turned out to be a subway station, or maybe just the post-Apocalyptic ruin of a subway station. From where she stood on the sidewalk looking down the stone stairs, Konstantin could hear the distant sound of people's voices and, even more distantly, music, but no trains. Maybe you could hike around post-Apocalyptic Noo Yawk Sitty in the tunnels, and bring your own music with you.

She crouched at the top of the stairs with her map, absently pressing the flesh of her throat together. The cut edges felt a bit like putty or clay, but they wouldn't stay closed for very long. She wondered idly if she should try to find a place to have herself sewn up, or whether she might even try it herself. If it was the sort of thing that Shantih Love would do—

There was a strange pressure all along her back, from her neck down to her feet. She stood up and turned around to see if some new weird experience had crept up behind her, but there was no one and nothing there. She was alone; the pressure was all in the suit, as if it were trying to push her down the steps into the subway.

"Help?" she asked, turning the map over. It became a book again in her hands. She found the section on the hotsuit almost immediately but she had to read it over three times to be sure she understood that the 'suit itself, being loaded with Shantih Love characteristics, was trying to give her a hint as to what to do next. At this point, apparently, Shantih Love would have descended into the subway.

Konstantin concentrated, placing her fingers on the sliced flesh of her throat and closing her eyes. There; now she could feel it. Now she could feel how the sensation of touching skin, touching flesh was all in the fingertips of the hotsuit. She wasn't really touching anything, or if she was, the AR sensation over-rode it sheerly by intensity, vividness, and the power of suggestion.

She opened her eyes and found herself looking down at a young Japanese man dressed in the plain garb of a laborer from about a hundred or so years before, but armed with what looked to her like a Samurai sword.

Konstantin pressed the book to her chest protectively; it became a map again. The man seemed not to notice. He gazed at her steadily, his expression mild, almost blank. He came up another step. She meant to retreat but something in his expression changed so that his face became slightly more severe, more wary, and she stayed where she was.

"Does this mean you've given up, Mr. *Iguchi?"* he asked in a soft, sarcastic voice. "Or have you just changed your strategy?"

"How do you know my name?" Konstantin asked him, wincing inwardly when she heard the tremor in her voice. It wasn't fear but cold—her 'suit seemed to have turned to ice.

The man came up another step. "Games again, Tom? It's always games with you."

"More like a malfunction, actually," she muttered, rubbing one arm. The temperature inside the suit was still dropping, as though it was trying to keep her cool inside a furnace.

"It's not cold tonight, Tom," the man said. "Are you sure it's not fear that's making you tremble?"

"Have it your way," Konstantin said desperately, hoping that might have some effect on the 'suit's wayward thermostat.

"Surely you're not afraid of *me*—or is it what I represent?"

Konstantin's teeth chattered "W-w-what would that be?"

"An old world that has nothing to do with what this world has become—this world, or the one it's contained in, or the one that *that* one is contained in, boxes within boxes, all the way to infinity." The man suddenly produced a strange coin between thumb and forefinger. It flashed silver for a moment; then Konstantin could see the symbol on it, like a figure 8 lying on its side. The man flipped it over and showed her the other side, a snake with its tail in its mouth.

"Though these are not Japanese symbols, there is still something very Japanese about what they represent. Old Japan, I'm talking about, not the hot icy flash of the nth generation of speed tribes, or the debauchery of the newest salarymen in the neon jungle that covered over the old signs and symbols."

He held it out to her, as if inviting her to take it, but when she reached for it, he flipped it again and snatched it out of the air. Konstantin pulled her hand back, embarrassed and irritated. The man put both hands behind himself for a moment and then held them up. "Which hand, Tom? You choose."

Konstantin tucked the map under her arm, trying to ignore the fact that she felt as if she were turning into an ice cube from the skin inward. "Let's see," she said, lifting her chin with bravado. "I used to be pretty good at this. Finding the tell, I mean. Everybody's got a tell. Even old Japan."

The man's eyes narrowed and he took a closer look at her. "You never used to be so smart, Tom. What happened since I saw you last—you take some genius pill somewhere? Something that's burning your brain cells out as you use them, maybe?"

Konstantin didn't answer; she scrutinized his right fist for a long time, and then his left. "Sometimes, it's a twitch, a tightening of the muscles. Sometimes, it's just that the person simply *looks* at the correct hand, whichever one it is. Doesn't matter, you just have to know what to look for, what *kind* of tell it is. Most of the time, you know, the person doing it doesn't even realize it. But it's there. There's always a tell, and it *tells* you what the answer is." Konstantin hesitated and then tapped the man's right fist. "I say there."

"You're not Iguchi," he said, not moving.

"Let's see it," said Kostantin. "I know I must be right. Otherwise, you wouldn't be delaying."

"You're *not* Iguchi. I should have seen it immediately. That's too smart for Iguchi. Where is old Tom tonight? Did he hire you, or did you buy him out? If you bought him out, I got to tell you, he stuck you with damaged goods there." He indicated her cut throat with a jab of his chin.

Konstantin felt more confident now. She stepped forward and tapped the knuckles of his right hand. "Come on, let me see it. I know it's there. Give me the coin and you can call it a night."

"Call it a night?" The man smiled, raised his right hand, and opened it. It was empty. "Or call it in the air?" He looked at his left hand as it unfolded in the same position to reveal that it, too, was empty. He stayed that way, with both hands raised, as if he were at gunpoint, or perhaps surrendering. Annoyed, Konstantin stepped back and folded her arms.

"Fine," she said. "But *I* know, and *you* know, that until you cheated, that coin was in your right hand. You can go ahead and take it away with you, but we both know you cheated, and we'll always know it. We'll never forget, will we?" She went to take the map from under arm and felt something funny in her palm. She looked down and opened her hand. The coin was there. She picked it up and looked at both sides.

"I told you to call it in the air," the man admonished her. "But the problem is, when you have a coin with infinity on one side, and Ouroboros on the other, how can you ever really know which side is heads, and which is tails?"

Konstantin said nothing. He burst out laughing, bowed to her, and walked away into the darkness. She could hear the echo of his laughter long after the shadows had swallowed him up.

She examined the coin again. Whatever else he might have said or done, he had given her the coin; she had just received some AR *stuff*. She wondered if this was the type of stuff Guilfoyle Pleshette was so enamored of, and if it were the sort of thing that someone might kill for.

She descended the stairs, feeling every bump and irregularity in the bannister with her free hand as the sounds of voices and music bounced off the grimy tiles. Sometimes the sensory input was too authentic to be authentic, Konstantin noted, almost amused. Until she got to the bottom of the stairs and saw the empty platform beyond the broken turnstiles and the long unused token-seller's cage. There were no people anywhere to be seen in the unnatural light of the fluorescent tubes, no movement anywhere at all. Dust and dirt lay thickly on everything, suggesting that no one had come here for a long, long time—which had to be wrong, since her Japanese friend had just come up out of here.

Or had he only been waiting for her at the bottom of the stairs? Her or someone like her—no, he had definitely been expecting Shantih Love, for *some* reason.

She looked at the lights overhead. They didn't hum or buzz; they didn't even flicker. Strange, for a place so disused and abandoned.

The coin grew slightly warmer in her fist. No, too high a price, she thought, amused. "Icon cat?" she asked, and it was there under her arm. She took hold of it with her free hand and maneuvered it open. "Subway?"

The pages flipped and came to rest on a picture of a wooden nickel. She could tell it was made of wood by the lustrous grain. Konstantin considered it and then shook her head. The pages flipped again and kept flipping, like a rotary card file in a high wind. Because there was a wind, she realized, coming from somewhere down in the old train tunnel. She could feel it and she could hear music again as well, except it was much thinner-sounding, just one instrument, either a guitar or a very good synthesizer.

"Pause," she told the book; it closed quietly for her. She climbed over one of the turnstiles and walked out onto the platform, looking around.

The man with the guitar was to her left, sitting cross-legged at the place where the platform ended and the tunnel began. His head was tilted back against the wall and his eyes were closed, so that he seemed to be in a state of deep concentration as he played. Konstantin wondered if he were going to sing, and then wondered exactly what kind of strange kick a person could get from spending billable time in AR alone in a vacant subway station, playing a musical instrument for nobody.

None, she decided. "Resume," she said, staring at the guitar player. *"Empty* subway, *downtown."*

The pages flipped again and stopped to show her a bottlecap. *CREAM SODA.* It fell out of the book onto the tile floor at her feet. Down by the tunnel, the guitar-player paused and turned to smile at her. The lights changed, becoming just a bit warmer in color as the legend NOW ENTERING NEXT HIGHER LEVEL ran along the bottom of her vision like a late-breaking item on *Police Blotter.*

People were all over the platform, standing in groups, sitting on the turnstiles, grouping together down on the tracks, picking their way over the rails and ties to the opposite platform, where there were even more people. At first, she saw only the same types she had seen on the shore in Shantih Love's AR log, but after awhile, she discovered that if she didn't look directly at people too quickly, a good many of them had somehow metamorphosed into characters far more original and indecipherable.

If there even *were* that many people, she thought, remembering the strange guy in white face and the gang that hadn't really existed. Maybe some of these people were carrying phantoms with them for company. If you could be your own gang in AR, was that another example of AR *stuff?*

A seven-foot-tall woman whose long, thick, auburn hair seemed to have a life of its own looked down at her through opera glasses. "What sort of a creature are you?" she asked in a booming contralto.

"I think I've forgotten," Konstantin said and then winced, squirming. The 'suit was reminding her *now* that it was full-coverage and that Shantih Love would have responded to this woman. It was like a nightmare. Her ex might have laughed at her and told her that was no less than what she deserved for stealing someone else's life.

I didn't steal it. He lost it and I found it.

Yeah. Finders, weepers.

Konstantin wasn't sure if it were worse to have an imaginary argument with an ex after a break-up than it was to have the break-up argument, but she was fairly sure it was completely counter-productive to have it both on billable AR time and during a murder investigation. If that was what this really was, and not just a massive waste of time all around.

"Do you know Body Sativa?" she asked the tall woman.

"Yes." The woman gazed at her a moment longer and walked away.

The people down on the tracks were dancing now to something that sounded like the rhythmic smashing of glass on metal. Konstantin hopped down off the platform onto the tracks and walked among them, keeping her gaze downward so that she could see them change in her peripheral vision. Most of the people down here seemed to be affecting what her ex had called rough and shoddy sugar-plum. Konstantin had to admit to herself she found the look appealing, in a rough and shoddy way.

She looked down at the ankle-length gown Shantih Love had preferred. In this light, it seemed to have more of a red tone, much more than she had thought. Even stranger was the texture—it looked like velvet but it felt like sandpaper, at least on the outside. Inside, the feeling was all but non-existent; the hotsuit was full-coverage but not so complete in the detailing that she felt the gown swinging and brushing against her ankles. For that, she supposed, you had to have some kind of custom job.

But at least she never tripped on the hem, Konstantin thought as she moved among the dancers, still holding the map. The display had not changed, even after she had gained access to this level, where all the people were, so either Body Sativa was here, or there was something wrong with the map.

Getting someone's attention to find out, however, seemed to be another one of those tricks she hadn't learned yet. Down on the tracks, anyway. The people dancing there weren't just ignoring her, they seemed honestly unaware of her, as if she were invisible. Which would seem to indicate she had found another level within a level. Levels within levels and boxes within boxes. Was there any purpose to it, she wondered—any *real* purpose other than to intrigue people into spending more billable hours solving the puzzle.

The guitar player, she saw, was still sitting in the same place, and it looked as if he were still playing as well, though it was impossible to hear anything except the smash-clang everyone around her was dancing to. She made her way through the group over to where the guitar-player was. The platform was about as high as her nose. She tried boosting herself up but couldn't get enough leverage.

"Stay," said the guitar-player, eyes closed. "I can see and hear you fine where you are."

"Good," said Konstantin. "Tell me, if I look past you, will you change into someone else, too?"

"It's all in what you can perceive," he said, smiling. Then, while she was looking directly at him, he morphed from a plump, balding young guy to an angular middle-aged man with very long, straight steel-grey hair. He still didn't open his eyes. "You'd be surprised how few turns of the morphing dial that took."

"Maybe not," she said. "Do you know Body Sativa?"

"Know her, or know of her?"

"Know her. Personally, or casually." She paused. "And have you seen her in here recently?"

He tilted his head, his closed eyes moving back and forth beneath his eyelids, as if he were dreaming, while his fingers played over guitar strings that appeared no thicker than spidersilk. Konstantin realized she couldn't hear the music coming from the guitar, but she could feel it surround her, not unpleasantly, and then disintegrate. "I was a dolphin in a previous incarnation," he said after a bit.

"Why did you change?"

"We all have to, sooner or later. I would have thought you'd know that as well as anyone. What were you before you passed on to your present manifestation?"

Konstantin barely hesitated. "A homicide detective."

"Ah. That accounts for the interrogation." He chuckled. "You know, the idea is to go on to something different, not just do the same thing behind a new mask."

Words to live by, Konstantin thought. Perhaps she could print them on a card and send it to her ex. She smiled. "That's pretty good for a guitar-playing land dolphin."

He stopped playing and pulled something out of the hole in the center of the instrument. "Here," he said, leaning forward and holding it out to her; it looked like a playing card. "You're not necessarily smarter than the last one who had your face, but the quality of your ignorance is an improvement."

"It is? How?" Konstantin asked, taking the card from him.

"*You* might actually learn something."

She studied the card, trying to see it clearly, except the image on it kept shifting, melting, changing. It looked like it might be some kind of Oriental ideogram. "What is this?" she asked.

"Cab fare," he said.

"Cab fare? In a subway station?"

"Trains aren't running tonight. Or didn't you notice?" He laughed.

She looked down at her map again. The display still hadn't changed. "I was supposed to find somebody I needed here. My map says she's still here."

The guitar player shook his head. "Sorry, you misunderstood. There's a locator utility here, for help in finding someone in the Sitty. That's what your map says is here." He shrugged. "There are locator utilities in all the subway stations."

Konstantin managed not to groan. "Where?"

"Somewhere. It's all in what you perceive."

"You're a big help."

"I am. If you get it figured, you have cabfare to get to wherever it is you need to go."

Cabfare, Konstantin thought. Cabfare. Did it include tip, she wondered, or was that what the coin was for? She looked down at it in her other hand.

The man stopped playing. "When did you get that?"

"Just now. Upstairs. Outside." Konstantin closed her fist around it again. "Why?"

"Because even in here, certain things are perishable. Like milk, or cut flowers."

"Or people with cut throats?" Konstantin added.

He smiled. "No, you may have noticed that death doesn't have to put a crimp in your party plans. On the other hand, it's not generally an accepted practice to start out dead. If you want to be dead, custom dictates that you die here."

"Here in the subway, or here in AR?"

"It's all in what you perceive."

He was going to say that once too often, Konstantin thought unhappily. "What about this coin?" she asked him. "Were you telling me just now that it's going to expire?"

"Conditions," he said after a moment. "It's the conditions under which it would be . . . *effective*. Conditions won't last."

"More words to live by," Konstantin muttered to herself. "I want to find the locator utility. How do I do that?"

"You have only to ask."

Konstantin frowned. "Who should I ask?"

"Me."

She hesitated. "All right. How do I find the locator utility."

"You have only to ask," he said again serenely, fingers picking at the strings of the guitar again.

"I just did," Konstantin said impatiently. "How—" She cut off. "No. *Where* is Body Sativa?"

The guitar player jerked his chin at her, still with his eyes closed. "Hail a cab, and when you're asked where you want to go, give the driver that."

Konstantin looked at the card again. The ideogram was still shifting. Suddenly she felt very tired and bored. "Are you sure this'll do it?"

"Oh, yeah. That'll take you right to her."

"It's that simple."

The guitar-player nodded. "It's that simple."

"Strange, nothing else in here seems to be."

"What you want is simple. All you had to do was state it in the proper place at the proper moment. In the proper form, of course. That's just elementary programming."

"Programming," Konstantin said, giving a short, not terribly merry laugh. "I should have known. You're the locator utility and the help utility, aren't you?"

"That's about what it comes down to," he said agreeably.

"And I had only to ask."

"Because it's what you want that's simple. You just want to meet up with another player so I gave you a tracer. Obviously you're not the usual Shantih Love, or even the usual player. The usual players don't want anything so simple. The usual players come down here looking for the secret subroutine to the Next Big Scene, or even the mythical out door. Then my job becomes something different. Then my job is to give them something that will stimulate a little thrill here and there, play to their curiosities and their fondest wishes and desires."

"And make them spend more billable hours," Konstantin said.

"The more hours people spend in here doing complicated things, the more interesting the Sitty becomes."

"Why don't you just tell people that, instead of playing to their wish-fulfillment fantasies about finding the egress or the secret subroutine to post-Apocalyptic Peoria, or wherever?"

"First of all, it's not my job to volunteer information. It's my job to answer questions. And I can only answer with what I know. I don't know that there's an egress . . . but I don't know that there isn't. I can't prove there isn't, I'm a utility. I wasn't created to determine whether my universe is finite or not."

I'm talking philosophy with a utility, Konstantin thought. "But surely you know whether there are secret subroutines?"

"If they're secret, they certainly wouldn't tell me. I'd tell anyone who asked and then they wouldn't be secret any more."

"All right," Konstantin said slowly. "Have there ever been any secret subroutines in the Sitty that you've found out about?"

"Some players have claimed to have accessed them."

"Were they telling the truth?"

"I'm not a lie detector."

"Wouldn't matter if you were, would it. Because it's all lies in here. Or all truth."

He went on playing, still with his eyes closed. Konstantin supposed he was the AR equivalent of blind justice—blind information. Which was probably much more accurate, all told.

"Have you ever met Shantih Love before?" she asked and then added quickly, "I mean, have you ever met a player named Shantih Love before I came in here?"

"I don't really *meet* anyone. I have everyone's name."

Konstantin thought for a moment. "Has anyone ever asked you to locate Shantih Love?"

"I don't remember."

"Why not?"

"I don't have to. There's no reason to."

"But if you can put a tracer on someone's location for another player, isn't there some record of that? Some, uh, trace?"

"Only while the tracer's active. But that record would be kept else-where in the system. You know, if you're so interested, there are schools you can go to to learn all about how AR works."

"I thought you didn't volunteer information," Konstantin said suspiciously.

"You call *that* information?"

She laughed in spite of herself. "You're right. Thanks for the cabfare." She started to walk away and then paused. "Where's the best place to get a cab in post-Apocalyptic Noo Yawk Sitty?"

"I don't know."

"All right." She sighed resignedly. "Where's the nearest I can find a cab?"

"I don't know. Cabs aren't players."

Konstantin nodded. She should have known, she thought.

She came up out of the subway into the middle of a riot.

Where the streets had been deserted before they were now full of people running, screaming, chasing each other, hurling furniture and other heavy objects from sixth and seventh story windows, from rooftops, from mid-air for all she knew.

Level access, she realized. When she had accessed the new level in the subway station, she had stayed there. If she went back to Times Square now, it wouldn't be deserted this time. Anxiously, she looked around for some clear route of escape, and then wondered if there really was any—maybe the riot was Sittywide, what with everything being post-Apocalyptic.

She sighed. What she should really do, she thought, was exit. This wasn't her kind of interest, she couldn't get into the spirit of it even for the sake of information-gathering on behalf of some poor murdered kid. And walking around disguised as the victim—the more she thought about it, the more it seemed like an act of grave-robbing, desecration. Better just to leave word in a number of message centers and hope that Body Sativa, or someone who knew her, would get in touch, and if so, that there would be some useful information to be gained. From her experience here, though, she didn't think that there would be. This had nothing to do with anyone's life, not anyone's real life. So how could it have anything to do with a kid's death? Or with seven other deaths?

Coincidences by way of statistical incidence? Her ex had always said that statistics bred coincidences. Konstantin wondered if familiarity breeding contempt was a coincidence as well.

A Molotov cocktail sailed over her head and shattered on a nearby brick wall, making a perfect wave circle of flames. The effect of the heat was so realistic she could have sworn her face was flushed. She put an arm up defensively and turned away—

It took her all of a second to register the blow followed by the impact of her body on the street; the punch in her upper chest had been so abrupt and powerful that her legs had flown out from under her and she'd hit the ground on her back. It *hurt,* as badly as the real thing would have. She thought she had run into one of the rioters and the program had authenticated the logical result. But then a half-circle of grinning faces appeared above her as she tried to sit up and catch her breath, and she couldn't believe it. Of all the damned things that could go on in this ridiculous scenario and she *would* go and trigger one of the least imaginative.

Before she could ask for the icon cat, they hauled her to her feet and began shoving her around so that she rebounded from one into another like a pinball in a very small machine. Still breathless, she tried to get a good look at them but they were pushing her around too quickly. The Molotov cocktail had ignited something and she could see others, some people and some not quite, watching in the firelight as her attackers played with her.

There had to be something in the icon cat that would help, she thought, something for protection, self-defense, *something.* Too bad, she realized, that she hadn't thought of that sooner and used some precautions.

They were shoving her around harder now, their hands slapping, punching, pummeling and the pain was only too real. In a situation like this, it was hard to remember that the sensation was all artificial, delivered via select stimulation of certain nerves in a certain way, coupled with elements that contributed to the power of suggestion. This was too authentic; she wondered if Tomoyuki Iguchi had had some kind of masochistic streak that he had indulged as Shantih Love—

And suddenly, she wasn't sure that it *wasn't* happening for real. Maybe Shantih Love hadn't been able to tell the difference there on the shore of the Hudson River, not until it was too late and he couldn't feel how the real blood was flowing along with the virtual, even though he could see, perhaps until the moment of his death, the virtual attacker who had come to hijack his persona. But *why.*

A leg kicked out as she stumbled sideways and she went down again. One of her attackers started to pull her up; she twisted away and fumbled the icon cat out onto the ground where she could see it.

It fell open to a fierce image that looked somehow a bit cartoony at the same time. She had a vague idea that it was a talisman of protection and grabbed for it, just as her attackers bellowed in triumph and tore the icon cat away from her.

Too late, she understood that the catalog with its treasure trove of icons—its *stuff*—was probably what they'd been after all along. She scrambled up but a heavy boot caught her in the midsection and she sat down hard.

One of them crouched down and shoved a face that looked like the product of a mating between a troll and a gargoyle up close to hers. "Hey, you never heard that expression, *be seated?*"

She scooted backward, trying to get away. He advanced on her with the rest of them behind him, one holding up her icon cat so she could see that they had taken the whole thing from her.

All but one page that she was still clutching in one hand, so hard that her knuckles hurt, a pain that *was* real, produced not by the hotsuit but by the way she was clenching her hand in this unreal place, a pain that paled next to the jazzy high-res authenticity of the 'suit but went deeper, all the way to the bone, to spread up her arm to her shoulder and over her chest.

They are killing me. They are really *killing me!*

The thought was a scream in her head. What was going on, out there beyond the bounds of the headmount and the neo-exo-nervous system, what was happening *out there,* how many were *out there,* why hadn't she figured there could be more than one, hidden in the air-processing ducts perhaps, with the cooperation of some insider, maybe bored and bitter Miles Mank, or even Pleshette, not bitter, just very bored. Or the *two* of them, yes, that would be perfect, pretending to be enemies but killing together—one covering the AR while the other one handled things *out there.*

And if so, what did they have in store for her? Her attackers were grabbing at her, jabbing and poking, laughing at her frightened reactions, their broad, crude faces impossibly ugly, as if cruelty itself had been a model for their formation, a base to elaborate from, a setting from which the morphing dial could be turned. What kind of sad, sick specimen of humanity would pay to be something so horrible—

The employee discount here, she remembered suddenly, was pretty good. She had to admire the boldness, to kill someone again so soon after the last one, and the detective investigating the case, no less! Ideal, though—the partner was too claustrophobic to jump right on the crime scene and they knew it. So by the time someone else, Celestine and DiPietro perhaps, arrived, they'd have jiggered the evidence, massaged the data, and she'd be more grist for the AR urban legend mill. *Ya hear about the homicide detective who was killed in AR investigating a murder? Yeah, incredible galloping head-bugs. Yeah, I think it happened in D.C., you know how life is so cheap there—*

Now the chief troll-gargoyle was waving around something that looked like a jagged fragment of mirror, poking it at her face. Her rational mind kept telling her that he couldn't possibly cut her face but her rational mind had shrunk to the size of a quark. The rest of her was buying it, believing it, *really really* believing it to the point where she could feel the small cuts on her face, the bloody murderous troll had cut her face and in a moment he would cut her throat, by the power of suggestion she would believe her throat was cut and so much for *extremo ruptura,* that they were all so sure that no one had had since St. Whoever. There just hadn't been any AR up until now that could compete with the faith of a fanatic saint with stigmata, but now there was, *now* there was, and let the coroner come in here, let them all come in here and see if the power of their own belief, their galloping head-bugs, let them survive it—

The torn page in her hand suddenly transformed into a claw. She let go with a scream and the claw grabbed her arm, pulled her up off the street, and then pulled her into the air. She screamed again as she felt her feet leave the ground; her inner ear went into the same frenzy it had that one and only time her ex had talked her into riding a roller coaster.

Post-Apocalyptic Noo Yawk Sitty spread out below her, revealing itself. Exposing itself, she thought, looking at the fires and the bursts of light on the skinny roadways below, and had a short laughing jag. It cut off as she looked up thinking she might get a look at the moon and saw the bizarre pointed head and on either side, the wings that suggested nightmares about bats or things satanic.

She seemed to be dangling in its claws. The way they gripped her around her shoulders and arms should have hurt, but did not, as if there were padding. It flew on smoothly, quickly and no matter how she tried to concentrate on where the real sensation was, her imagination overrode her rational mind—grown to the size of a pea now, perhaps?—and she *did* feel the wind on her face.

"I was supposed to be a pterodactyl," said the creature conversationally, "but my designer got carried away."

"Oh. Really." Konstantin was amazed at how calm her own voice sounded. But then it wasn't her own voice, it was Shantih Love's; she was living a Shantih Love adventure and maybe Shantih Love traveled by mutant pterodactyl regularly. "Are you a device in the game or an employee of the company that licenses the Sitty out to parlors?"

"Now that would be telling," said the pterodactyl, sounding amused but at the same time a bit stiff, "and I thought you would know already, since you summoned me."

"You're an icon?" Konstantin asked.

"You got lucky. I'm a rescue. I make sure you don't get caught in dead end loops that eat up billable time and don't deliver much in return. If you *must* know. If you really need to spoil the effect."

"Sometimes it's not such a tragedy to spoil the effect," Konstantin murmurred. "Where are you taking me?"

"The destination is stipulated by your cabfare. And if you don't mind spoiling the effect that much, why didn't you just signal for the exit?"

"Well . . . I think I got sucked into the story and wanted to see how it would come out."

"A common ailment," said the pterodactyl wisely. "Do you know about the joke that ends in the punchline, 'The food here is terrible, and in such small portions'?"

"What?" Konstantin was bewildered.

"Never mind. You're here." The wings enfolded her so that she couldn't see anything at all. Then the darkness lifted and she saw that the creature had set her down right next to the barrier that separated the street from the shore of the Hudson River.

Just past the barrier was the party that had been invisible to her on the first time through. People spread inward from a very long pier to the barrier itself. If she listened carefully, Konstantin could almost make out bits of conversation that may have been fascinating, if only she could have heard enough.

She sat on the barrier, unsure of what to do next. Take a walk and see if someone came to hijack Shantih Love again? All up and down the street, wrecked vehicles were still burning, somehow never diminishing, the flames shifting but still never really changing. In a place where supposedly anything could happen, did anything happen?

Konstantin looked at the party again. "Redisplay," she said quietly. "Full mode."

Guilfoyle Pleshette must have been screaming, she thought as the AR log of Shantih Love's murder rolled in and settled like fog. Redisplaying a log within a running AR scenario probably doubled the hourly rate and there was no charge account number designated to cover it. But if she were screaming, Konstantin couldn't hear it. Their respective realities were sound-proof.

But apparently not leak-proof, she thought, touching her sliced throat as the redisplayed Shantih Love appeared in front of her, close enough to touch, close enough for Konstantin to see the flawless texture of that burnished copper/gold skin and the flecks of gold in those custom-made eyes, beautiful but wary.

The redisplayed Shantih Love started the ill-fated walk along the barrier and Konstantin joined in, pacing the image on the right. Her virtual body mirrored Love's movements such that she had no doubt she was reliving Tomoyuki Iguchi's walk in almost every detail. Iguchi just hadn't known his virtual self was going to be hijacked and killed. Which meant he couldn't know now, and yet the redisplayed Shantih Love seemed more apprehensive than she had remembered. Or was that just the fact that Full Mode was letting her see more and see it better than the small flat No Frills images she had viewed in Pleshette's office?

Beyond the redisplayed view of the shore and the party, she could see the current party-goers turning to look and maybe wonder who the show-off with the deep pockets was, doing a redisplay within a scenario. It was strange and extravagant even for post-Apocalyptic Noo Yawk Sitty, where time and civilization had come to an end and the twilight of the gods was currently in progress. Except judging by the parties she kept coming across, Konstantin thought it might be more like the happy hour of the gods.

And then again, maybe her ex had been right in saying that she couldn't believe in anything because she had no respect for anything.

A small flood of people detached themselves from the party and ran to join the redisplay, melting in almost seamlessly. There wasn't time to be discomfited—the vague creature was already on top of the barrier, except it didn't look terribly vague any more. It looked an awful lot like Miles Mank after six very bad weeks on a binge.

Straddling the barrier a few feet away from him was a tattooed woman watching his every move intently. Konstantin had never seen the character before but she knew just by the posture and the tilt of the head that it had to be a stringer from someplace like *Police Blotter*. Whether it was the same one from the parlor or a different one from a competing network, she didn't know and it really didn't matter anyway.

As if sensing her thoughts, the tattooed woman turned in Konstantin's direction, smiling speculatively. Konstantin saw the tattoos were in motion, melting and changing. In spite of everything, she took a moment to wonder what the point was.

Then she took a step forward, uncertain of what she meant to do—try to intimidate the stringer into leaving, ask her nicely to back off, promise her exclusive interviews with everyone involved, living or dead, if she'd refrain from broadcasting. But as she moved toward the barrier, the redisplayed Shantih Love took a step back and Konstantin found herself suddenly enveloped by the image.

It seemed as if everything around her took a giant step in every direction at once, including up and down. Then her surroundings refocused sharply. The shaggy creature jumped down and she found herself turning within the redisplayed Shantih Love and running, staggering through the sand, unable to do anything else. Some glitch had merged her program with the redisplay—

Some glitch? Or the panting, sobbing creature behind her? Or even something else completely?

Her heart pounded so hard as she pulled herself up the stony rise to the street that she wondered how many people had sustained heart attacks just imagining that they were moving on a physical level they were incapable of in realtime.

Desperately, she tried to pull out of the redisplayed Shantih Love image but it was like being caught in a powerful magnetic field that worked on flesh—on *thoughts*, on both. Boxes within boxes, levels within levels, a guy pretending to be Japanese pretending to be a hermaphrodite named Shantih Love, and a cop pretending to be a hermaphrodite named Shantih Love pretending . . . what?

It took forever to hit the ground and it *hurt.* She tried to scramble up and cry out for help, but Mank was on her and the blade was in his hands. She had nothing now, no rescue, no icon cat, no help files—

Something flashed in her open hand; she could see it just barely out of register with Love's redisplayed hand and hope surged through her like an electric current. The difference, the one thing that was different now between her image of Shantih Love and the redisplayed image, the thing that could change what had already gone before . . . sort of.

But she'd have to call it in the air, and she wasn't sure she could. *When you have a coin with infinity on one side, and Ouroboros on the other, how can you ever really know which side is heads, and which is tails?* There wasn't time to figure it out. As the blade touched her throat, she tore her arm free of the recording's, hurled the coin at the night sky, and called it.

The word that came out of her mouth was not what she had been expecting, but then, she hadn't really known what to expect, nor did she recognize it. Whatever it was—the term for the link between alpha and omega, the secret name of Ourobouros, or the nine billionth name of God—it had come with the coin as both property and function, and she could not have called it until now, when somehow, conditions were right.

The knife blade descended, but she was receding from it at the speed of thought and it never reached her.

Had she receded from it, from that level? Or had all of it receded from her? There was no real way to tell. The only feeling she had now was a sense of acceleration that wasn't quite flying and wasn't quite falling. Her inner ear kept wanting to go crazy on her, but something would pull it back from the brink at the last moment, sending thrills through the back of her neck.

Konstantin tried curling into the fetal position, just for the sake of being able to feel her body. There were several moments of uncertainty and disorientation while she tried to locate her extremities. Then abruptly, she found herself seated in an old-fashioned leather chair at a large round table. Across from her was a woman with deep brown skin and long black hair brushed back from her face like a lion's mane.

Konstantin stared, unable to speak.

"I understand you've been looking for me." The quality of the woman's voice was like nothing Konstantin had ever known before; it was sound, but translated into several other modes and dimensions, delivered all at once in a way that both enveloped and penetrated. It felt to Konstantin as if the woman's voice were coming through from the fabric of reality itself, any reality, including that of Konstantin's own thoughts.

After a while, Konstantin managed to nod. She wasn't sure how long it had taken her to do that, but it felt as if it had been a very, very long time. Body Sativa didn't seem to mind. However long something took here was how long it took.

"Things that happen, happen. Some things cannot be breached under pain of the consequences of procedure that is . . . improper. It is a matter of finding the route. The connection. The connecting matter. Road? Bridge? Tunnel? Or Something Else?"

Something Else was not exactly what Body Sativa had said, but it was the only thing that would come through Konstantin's ear. She watched as Body Sativa spread her arms over the table, palms outward. It took another unmeasurable period of time for Konstantin's eyes to adjust, but when they did, she saw that the surface of the table was more like a large video screen, or telescopic window. Or, as was more likely in the land of the Ouroboros coin, both.

Konstantin realized that whatever it was, she was looking at another aerial view of post-Apocalyptic Noo Yawk Sitty, every square inch and pixel revealed. Eliot's etherized patient after all, but prepared on the banquet table, not the operating table. The consumed and the consumers—it just depended what side of the table you were on . . . didn't it?

"Look deeper."

Her point-of-view seemed to fly out from her in the way she had heard out-of-body experiences described, though this was more matter-of-fact than filled with wonder. It zoomed down into the Sitty and the tiny, vein-sized roadways grew into canyons, with cliff-faces made of mirrored glass and carved stone gargoyles, gables, spires, columns, pitted brick splattered with glitter that did not quite obscure the burn marks, the blasted places, the dirty words.

Wreckage in the roadways ignited, the flames rising to form complex shapes, lattices, angles that opened and closed on each other, here and there icons, some of which she recognized. And in other places, ideograms.

There they are, Iguchi, those special places they said you had to be Japanese to find, she thought. *Maybe this means we've both turned Japanese. For my next magical trick, I will find the egress. The out door.*

As if in direct response, her pov flew straight toward a door, which opened at the last moment, admitting her into a split-second of darkness and then into a badly lit room where she saw the person strapped in the chair, sitting forward so that the straps pulled taut, but comfortably, in a way that supported more than restrained. The headmount moved slowly upward, the person raising her head to look up.

It was too easy, though, too bizarrely . . . *expectable,* Konstantin thought. But then, it *was* just a story.

Her nerves had become Holy Rollers. Just a story or not, she wasn't ready to see this. Maybe she wasn't Japanese enough.

In the next moment, her pov had snapped back like a rubber band and she was looking across the table at Body Sativa again. The woman looked younger now, more like a girl than a grown woman. This post-Apocalyptic stuff was really something. No wonder so many people liked it. It was downright eerie. Like the story of the man who didn't open his parachute in an AR skydive, or the kid who got his throat cut because he'd gotten his AR throat cut.

Body Sativa seemed amused. *"You have the coin. When you're ready to come back, call it in the air."*

It took an hour for Konstantin to open her mouth and say, "Wait!" Her voice sounded unpleasantly flat in her own ears. "Someone killed—"

"Yes. Someone did. When you're ready to know, call it in the air."

She was lying on her back on the road; Shantih Love was walking away, holding his/her sliced flesh together. But when s/he turned around and looked back, the face was unmistakably the creature's, the ridiculously bendered-out features of Miles Mank, still on a binge.

"Endit," Konstantin whispered, her voice still sounding funny to her. "Endit, exit, outa here."

She lay on her back for a very long time before she felt the road transmute into the chair with the restraints. Moving slowly, she undid the clasps on the headmount and was startled to feel someone helping her lift it off her head.

Taliaferro stood over her with the headmount in his hands, which was even more startling, and perhaps the most impossible of everything she had seen. By way of explanation, he reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a white plastic inhaler. "When I've got my anti-claustrophobia medicine, I can do anything."

"Words to live by," Konstantin whispered. There seemed to be nothing more to her voice than a rough whisper. She looked past him, but there was no one in the doorway.

"So, did you learn anything?" he asked her, sounding just slightly condescending. Perhaps that was a function of his medicine as well. She didn't hold it against him.

"Oh, yeah." She slipped out of the restraints and went over to the wall to her left. The control that let down the chaise was just slightly below eye level for her. She hit it with the side of her hand and it swung out and down in a way that reminded her of the way kids might stick out their tongues. Nyah, nyah, nyah.

"It was actually very simple," she said wearily, "but Celestine and DiPietro weren't thorough enough. The killer hid inside the Murphy style compartment, waited until Iguchi was all wrapped up in what he was doing, and then sliced him." Nyah, nyah, nyah.

Taliaferro was nonplussed. "You sure about that?"

"Yeah," she said. "Yeah. It's Occam's Razor is what it is. The simplest explanation is *the* explanation."

"Any idea who might have been hiding in there with Occam's Razor?"

Her moment of hesitation was so short, she was sure that Taliaferro didn't notice it, but at the same time, it was very long, incredibly, immeasurably long, of a duration that only Body Sativa could have understood and waited patiently enough for. "Yeah. It was Mank. He was bitter about not being the manager and not too stable. He frequented post-Apocalyptic Noo Yawk Sitty on the generous employee discount enough times that he got a bad case of gameplayers' psychosis. He was killing in there and it spilled over to killing out here."

"You sound awful sure about all that," Taliaferro said doubtfully.

"You'd have to go in and see it for yourself. There's all kinds of—of *stuff* in there. Including memes for murder. Mank got one. Let's grab him and see if we can have him all tucked in before *Police Blotter* does an update. I think there was a stringer following me around in there."

Taliaferro grunted, took a hit off his inhaler, and dropped it into his pocket. "Okay. I guess that's it, then."

"Yeah," Konstantin said. "That's it."

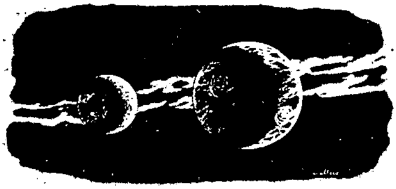
"Okay," he said again. Pause. "I'll send someone back here with your clothes."

"Thanks." But she was talking to the air. Taliaferro had run off. Apparently there was only so much an inhaler could do. There was only so much anything could do. Anything, or anyone. Even Occam's Razor. But then, the murder weapon hadn't been the same in the other seven murders anyway. No indeed. And Mank looked good for this one, she insisted to herself. He looked too good. The image of him in the Sitty was too identifiable not to be damning. The ego of the man, using his own face. Although that might be a more widespread practice than anyone realized.

But could anything really be surprising in the land of anything goes, she thought. The fabled promised land of AR, where they had everything there was in realtime—including death—and more besides.

If anything goes, then let anyone go as well. Mank looks good for it, and if the state can't prove its case against him, then it can't. But let him be the one who goes this time. For now. Until—well, when?

In her mind's eye, she saw the image of the coin again, the loop of infinity on one side, Ouroboros on the other. Maybe until you were ready to know which came first when you called it in the air. ●



ON BOOKS

by Peter Heck

NEW LEGENDS

Edited by Greg Bear with Martin Harry Greenberg
Tor, $22.95 (hc)

Here's a good cross section of the current state of science fiction, with original stories in modes ranging from the hardest of hard SF to goofball comedy. Bear includes enough established stars (Poul Anderson, Greg Benford, Ursula K. Le Guin) to give the anthology commercial appeal, as well as strong work by younger writers (including Mary Rosenblum, Paul McAuley, and Greg Egan) who are working out their own synthesis of the elements of the genre. And while Bear's criterion for choosing the stories—"science fiction with a great soul"—may seem more than usually arbitrary, it seems to have worked; the anthology really has no weak stories.

Bear has chosen to organize *New Legends* thematically: the stories are grouped into six sections called Choices; Growing Up; Them and Us; Win, Lose or Draw; Redemption; and Ciphers. Of course such classifications are subjective, but the grouping is an effective way to suggest larger issues. And there is precedent in such classic SF anthologies as Groff Conklin's *Omnibus of Science Fiction,* one of the first books I can remember reading. Besides pointing to larger issues, grouping the stories by theme can make the anthology more useful to a reader with limited previous exposure to science fiction.

"Choices" is anchored by two of the strongest stories in the book. Mary Rosenblum's "Elegy" finds a scientist trying to understand an apparently impossible natural phenomenon, while at the same time dealing with a parent stricken by Alzheimer's disease; the personal and scientific themes are well balanced, and the story's resolution flows naturally from its premises. "A Desperate Calculus," by Sterling Blake (a pseudonymous writer also represented in this anthology under the by-line with which most SF readers are more familiar), offers a chilling look at the world population problem. Blake's story could be taken as a sort of "modest proposal," offering a solution so unacceptable (and yet quite feasible, given a few minor advances in biotechnology) that it forces the reader to search for some alternative. Sad to say, there are very few on the horizon.

"Growing Up" includes Ursula K. Le Guin's "Coming of Age in Karhide," a return to Gethen, the planet on which her classic novel *The Left Hand of Darkness* is set. The natives of Gethen are of indeterminate gender except during *kemmer,* their time of sexual readiness, when they may become either male or female. How is a person growing up in such a society initiated into the rites of adulthood and full sexuality? Le Guin gives us a native's view of the process, and anyone who enjoyed the novel will welcome the chance to revisit its world—and gain a new perspective on it.

"Us and Them" offers four views of alien creatures. At one extreme is Gregory Benford's austere "High Abyss," built around the fine points of advanced physics. At the other is Robert Sheckley's "The Day the Aliens Came," an ordinary guy's view of extraordinary events. It's the kind of story Sheckley has been doing since the '50s, matter-of-factly juxtaposing the familiar and the preposterous. Tone of voice is everything in a story like this, and Sheckley's control is nearly perfect. It's strange to see a writer like Douglas Adams reaching an enormous audience with material that (except for the British accent) is almost indistinguishable from Sheckley's, while Sheckley's writings are mostly out of print.

Some of the strongest stories in the anthology are in the "Win, Lose, or Draw" section, which focuses on the theme of war. Greg Abraham's "Gnota" follows a wounded soldier who gets a firsthand look at the way replacement organs are grown, while Geoffrey A. Landis's "Rorvik's War" is one of the better virtual-reality war stories I've read. Carter Scholz's "Radiance" is a look inside a laboratory doing defense research, from the perspective of a physicist who has begun to realize that his work has sidetracked him from a once promising theoretical career. The scientific content is all but incidental, but the story is a welcome return to fiction by a writer who has been out of action for too long. And Gregory Benford's article "Old Legends" makes an interesting connection between early science fiction fandom and the creators of the atomic bomb.

The "Redemption" section offers George Alec Effinger's "One," which was reportedly rejected at one time or another by all the major editors in the field. Effinger dares to challenge one of the most fundamental premises of science fiction: the firm conviction that the human race is not alone in the universe, but one of many intelligent life-forms. But Effinger is not simply pushing buttons to see who yells the loudest; at the core of the story is a profound philosophical message, and even readers who find its premise uncongenial are likely to find themselves pondering the story's broader implications.

In the final section, "Ciphers," we find the kind of problem-solving story one associates with John W. Campbell's view of SF. Poul Anderson's "Scarecrow" throws two space explorers into a life-and-death situation that requires them to solve a problem of robot psychology. The reader gets the feeling that (except for the advances in science on which its solution depends) Anderson could have written the story forty years ago. Anderson offers not only impeccable craftsmanship but a concern with the human values behind its scientific and technical subject matter.

Anyone who enjoys well-done short fiction (a category I would assume most of the readers of this magazine to fall into) will find Bear's *New Legends* exactly what the doctor ordered.

HUMILITY GARDEN:
An Unfinished Biography
by Felicity Savage
Roc, $4.99

Felicity Savage makes her debut as a novelist with a classic "young person from the provinces" tale, set in a world where the gods are real, capricious, and oppressive. In some ways the book is an almost archetypal first novel: aggressively young, deliberately shocking, and often self-indulgent. But while long-time readers have seen the basic counters with which Savage is playing many times before, her take on them is fresh enough to justify the publicity campaign surrounding the book's publication.

The novel is set on a world appropriately named "Salt," where the human population lives in the margins between sea and salt deserts on a group of six large islands. (Actually, the term "human" is somewhat misleading; we learn early on that the race referred to by that name has furry pelts, in a variety of colors.) Like old-time New England puritans, the pious give their children names evoking moral qualities; thus the narrator is Humility, or (to most of her acquaintances) Humi.

At the beginning, Humi is with her cousin Beau (short for "Beauty"), who is doing his best to damage himself. The reason, we learn, is that because of his great beauty, he has been chosen (much against his own inclinations) to travel to Delta City, become a ghost, and be given to the gods. Humi argues him out of his destructive behavior, pointing out what a great honor it is to be chosen. But she has her own motive for persuading him to follow his destined path: she wants to accompany him, escaping her backward homeland in favor of the cosmopolitan city, where everything is green and the gods walk the streets every day: the eternal young person's dream of every generation, leaving one's hick hometown behind for the big city.

In Delta City, Humi and Beau are given special treatment, since the ghosts must be at their most beautiful. And even though they are well aware (and are told in so many words) that Beau must die if he is going to become a ghost, the two young people seem curiously unconcerned. So when the actual moment of truth arrives, the reader is caught by surprise. So is Humi, who barely escapes being killed before joining the ghostiers, the select group of murderers who study the trade of turning the dead into *objets d'art* for the amusement of the gods. Apprenticing herself to Erene, a senior ghostier and member of the council, Humi begins her climb into the innermost circles of influence in the great city.

And of course she finds herself

coming into more and more frequent contact with the gods, who really do walk the streets of Delta City. These gods are quite human in their appetites—one of them tries to seduce Beau before his conversion to ghostly status—and their influence on the city is palpable. (Even so, there are many atheists among the city's population; they do not deny the existence of the gods, only that they are superior beings who deserve a human's reverence and obedience.) Humi becomes a close associate to the Divinarch, the god who serves as the head of government in Delta City. And she gradually learns that there is an ongoing conspiracy to eject the gods from their place at the heart of the government and replace them with mere human rulers. At first this is quite a shock to Humi, raised in a pious rural family; but as she begins to learn the ways of the city, and the true nature of the gods, she begins to agree with the revolutionaries. Not only are the gods not superior beings, they are parasites upon the human race—even though they have the power to perform miracles.

Meanwhile, the demands of the ghostier's trade force her to become more and more cynical. One advances by killing one's mentor, or someone else of high rank; Humi resists this method of gaining status, if only because she actually likes her mentor Erene. But eventually she finds a way around her scruples, and becomes a member of the Council. More importantly, she takes part in a revolution that ejects the gods from the seat of power in the city. Her life becomes more complicated, as she makes the transition from irresponsible youth into adulthood, and at the end of the book she finds herself the target of power plays on the part of other ghostiers and Council members. An author's note at the end indicates that a second volume will follow.

Savage appears to know exactly what she is doing at every point, and her control of style and tone would put many of her seniors to shame. *Humility Garden* is an exciting debut, floating somewhere between the borders of science fiction and fantasy (the publisher has opted for the latter designation, probably because magic and miracles play a major role in the plot). As with some of the other young British writers in recent years, Savage is a strong voice, and probably not to everyone's taste; but if this well-crafted first novel is any indication, she has a very interesting career ahead of her.

THE LIONS OF AL-RASSAN

by Guy Gavriel Kay

Harper Prism, $20.00 (hc)

Taking place in the equivalent of fourteenth-century Spain, this is the third of Kay's novels to explore the fantasy possibilities of Mediterranean societies (after *Tigana* and *A Song for Arbonne*). As in the previous novels in this set (it hardly qualifies as a series) the tension arises as much from the clash of cultures as from the interaction of characters.

Kay does not make explicit the parallels between his invented mythologies and those of the real world, but the equivalents are clear enough to anyone with a little familiarity with history. The reader will not be far wrong to think of the Asharites as essentially Muslims, the Jaddites as Christians, and the Kindath as Jews. As in our own history, the Asharites are a conquering people arising in the eastern deserts, who have been rulers of Al-Rassan for centuries; now the Jaddites have begun to reclaim the land they once ruled. Caught in the middle are the Kindath, who have no direct stake in the struggle, but who are often the first victims of fanatics of both camps. In essence, then, this is historical fantasy with the serial numbers filed off: Kay gets the emotional resonance of playing with real history, but the imaginative freedom of original fantasy. It should be noted that (as in *Arbonne*) there is a minimum of fantastic content, short of one minor character's ESP abilities.

The central characters are chosen from each of the three cultures of Al-Rassan. The first we meet is Ammar ibn Khairan, who appears as an assassin in the very first scene. A poet as well as a warrior, he clearly embodies the values of his culture, as does his opposite number on the "Spanish" side, Ser Rodrigo Belmonte. Belmonte is in many ways parallel to El Cid, a beloved captain of legendary honor, married to the most beautiful (and most dangerous) woman in the country. We are introduced to him through the eyes of Alvar de Pellino, a young cavalryman who inadvertently overhears him responding with cool indifference to a royal official's extortion attempt. The third major character is Jehane bet Ishak, a Kindath woman who is a physician and whose father is a legendary physician blinded by an Asharite ruler for the crime of looking upon his wife's naked body while performing a Caesarean section that saved her life and that of her son. We meet her as the Asharite despot is systematically killing all the eminent men of her city on the "Day of the Moat"—and as she saves one of her patients from the mass execution.

Willy-nilly, these three characters are thrown together as allies in the borderlands between the Asharite and Jaddite kingdoms. Despite their differences of religion, Ammar and Rodrigo are men of honor with more in common with one another than with the rulers whose orders they must obey, rulers who are Machiavellian opportunists willing to do whatever it takes to consolidate and expand their power. And Jehane is dedicated to her healer's art, no matter what the patient's religion or race.

But the larger political decisions in Al-Rassan are being made by fanatics of both extremes, who espouse doctrines best described as arising from considerations of ethnic purity. The Jaddites are being pushed by foreign emissaries who have no sympathy for anyone not of their faith. And despite the corruption of the Asharites' rulers, Kay makes us aware of the true strength of the religion, arising as it does from a puritanical desert culture that rejects accommodation with citified ways. It becomes clear very early that a clash between the two cultures is inevitable, and that reasonable men and women will be pushed into uncomfortable positions.

Ammar and Rodrigo are forced into exile in a border city that skates between the extremes of both cultures. With them are Jehane, who finds herself courted by both men; Alvar, who grows to warrior status under the tutelage of the two heroes; and Husari ibn Musa, a merchant who escaped the slaughter of his fellow citizens in the Day of the Moat. The fortunes of war and of politics make up most of the rest of the larger plot, in which there are plenty of confrontations, reversals, and surprises. Kay's ability to spin several apparently independent plots that come magically together in the final scenes is unrivaled, and he has a great affinity for battle scenes that work on a larger symbolic level without dodging the fact that people are getting killed on the literal level.

For all its strengths, *Al-Rassan* is marginally less exciting than either *Tigana* or *A Song for Arbonne*—possibly because Kay seems to be repeating too closely the patterns of his own successes. Also, one wonders whether the story might not have been told equally well without setting up a fantasy world in which to place it; Kay does less with the invented religions here than with those of *Arbonne,* which carried considerable symbolic weight in the larger statement of that book. It might be just as effective to tell essentially the same story using Christians, Muslims, and Jews in medieval Spain, instead of made-up religions in a made-up country that almost every reader will recognize as stand-ins for something in the real historical world. Still, it is no great shortcoming for Kay to fall short of his previous two books, which may be the two finest fantasy novels of the last decade. Kay is very close to peak form here, and that is about as good as contemporary fantasy gets.

CARLUCCI'S EDGE

by Richard Paul Russo

Ace, $5.99

Russo's latest novel returns to the future San Francisco setting of his *Destroying Angel,* mixing the character emphasis of the best crime fiction with strong world-building. The new book is not a sequel in the usual sense; Tanner, the main protagonist of the earlier book, plays no role here. Instead, the focus is on Frank Carlucci, a police detective who played a supporting role in *Destroying Angel,* and Paula Asgard, a rock musician who comes home from a gig to find her boyfriend—a low level drug dealer and hustler—murdered. When the police make it clear that they have no interest in solving the case, she calls on Carlucci, whom one of her friends has told her is an honest cop.

Carlucci has little time to devote to the case, having been assigned to a high-profile case involving the mayor's nephew. But he contacts the officer in charge, and quickly learns that someone higher up has killed the investigation. Normally, that would be the end of it. Carlucci hates politics, and hates to see good cops kept from doing their jobs, but there is only so much any one man can do. He gives Paula a non-committal answer to her inquiry, and tries to get on with his own work. Then he realizes that his own high-profile case has subtle connections to the murder of Paula's boyfriend. And the web of connections begins to grow more complex and more difficult to ignore.

Meanwhile, Paula has decided to investigate on her own, following her nose into the backwaters of the city and trying to trace the possible links between her dead boyfriend and his various legal and illegal enterprises. The search takes her into the Tenderloin, a wonderfully described wide-open underworld neighborhood that combines all the most colorful features of all the most exotic bordertowns in fiction. Russo's Tenderloin juxtaposes Black, Asian, Latino, Arab, and European cultures (and who knows what else) in close and uneasy proximity, encapsulating the lure of a cosmopolitan cityscape in one exotic neighborhood. As in *Destroying Angel,* the color and energy of the novel is strongly focused in the Tenderloin, with the even more dangerous Core as an ultimate heart of darkness within the urban jungle.

As with much of the best crime fiction, as well as many of the most memorable near-future SF novels, the city itself is as much a character as any of the people who populate the story. Russo has an excellent eye for the urban landscape, conjuring up settings that ring true to the actual sense of a living city without undercutting the reader's awareness that this is really a *future* city.

Russo also has the crime writer's well-tuned ear for the vernacular (an area where many SF writers fall short). From street punks right up to the high-level officials, his characters have individual, identifiable voices. The rhythms of the language are right, as well, right down to the pauses and elisions of spoken English. Better still, Russo manages to convey the feeling of future street talk without simply recycling current clichés and without the embarrassment of made-up future slang that no reader with a decent ear could imagine coming out of a real person's mouth.

Just as Carlucci starts to home in on the case involving the mayor's nephew, the political wheels start turning again, and he is offered an attractive bribe if he will let the case die. This is too much for Carlucci to stomach. He and his team decide to go ahead with the investigation. At the same time, the case takes an even more bizarre turn as a main witness is captured by a fanatical religious group headed by a woman who styles herself Saint Catherine—and who subjects her captives to ordeals based on the ordeal of her namesake at the hands of the Romans. One of Russo's particular strengths is the ability to take a conventional mystery plot and kick it up to a higher energy level, partly by bringing in such highly charged material at a crucial point.

Of course, in the time-honored fashion of the hard-boiled mystery, the novel finally builds to a revelation of the evil and corruption at high levels. And Carlucci manages to keep his honor intact in spite of the temptations to sell out. But Russo is not just rewriting Raymond Chandler in a cyberpunk setting; the conclusion of the story, and the solution of the mystery, have roots in the science fictional setting, and the temptations the bad guys offer Carlucci at a crucial point would be very hard for any of us to turn down if we were given the chance to grab them. The moral ground Russo stakes out for his hero is difficult and austere, and Carlucci lives up to the heroic code of honor as well as any of the trench-coated knights walking the mean streets of cities, past, present, or future.

ILL WIND

by Kevin J. Anderson and Doug Beason
Forge, $23.95

Here's a novel that thirty years ago would have been published as straight-ahead science fiction; nowadays it's a technothriller, aimed at an audience that apparently thinks it doesn't like SF. Therein lies one of the most curious features of the current state of the genre: the most popular current writers of science fiction are marketed as if they're writing something else entirely. Michael Crichton, Stephen King, and several other major talents have been effectively gerrymandered out of the science fiction section of your local bookstore, and their books are conspicuously absent from the genre's awards ballots and bestseller lists, despite the enormous number of people who read them. And one editor tells the story of how, when his higher-ups told him that his SF line was doing poorly, he pointed to the success of Isaac Asimov, whose books his imprint published. "Asimov isn't science fiction," said the higher-ups. "He's a bestseller."

Anderson and Beason give a solid demonstration of how to transform the stuff of good old-fashioned disaster SF into a modern technothriller. The book begins in the near future, when a fully-loaded supertanker, the *Oilstar Zoroaster,* runs into the Golden Gate Bridge and cracks open in the middle of San Francisco Bay. The resulting oil spill—the largest in history, and right where the public can see its full effects—is as disastrous for the tanker's owners as for the ecology of the Bay. Faced with an understandably hostile public reaction and a cleanup job of impossible proportions, Oilstar decides to take a gamble on a biotechnical solution: a new strain of microbe called Prometheus, bred to break down octane into water and carbon dioxide. While the microbe cannot eliminate the spill entirely, it will reduce the pollutants by nearly two-thirds, providing visible evidence that Oilstar is dealing with the disaster.

Of course, the solution turns out to be worse than the problem. Despite its inventors' assurances that it cannot spread beyond the spill, the microbe becomes airborne (thus the title), and starts breaking down the gas in people's cars. It rapidly spreads, expanding its diet to include aviation fuel, plastics—and eventually almost every imaginable synthetic substance that contains an octane-like molecule. (A series of lists of susceptible items compiled by scientists studying the "petro-plague" are sobering reminders of just how dependent our society is on petroleum and its byproducts.) Society—as in the disaster novels British SF writers used to crank out in the '50s and '60s—rapidly crumbles.

The authors present this story through a multiplicity of viewpoints, following some forty characters through the vicissitudes of the petro-plague and its aftermath. (The expanded cast of characters is one of the hallmarks of the technothriller, and of the "big book" generally; it gives the sense of the magnitude of the events, by showing their effects on a large cross section of society.) So we follow the careers not just of the scientists and technicians trying to reverse the course of the disaster, but also of a venal southern congressman elevated by chance to the presidency; the tanker captain, trying to live down his responsibility for the crash; an Air Force general who responds to the collapse of society with draconian measures; and an insurance claims adjuster who takes to the backwoods when she realizes that her job has lost all meaning.

Ultimately, as in most novels based on the collapse of civilization as we know it, a new order begins to evolve, based on old-fashioned skills and values. Predictably, horses become valuable commodities; so does a museum's antique steam locomotive, newly restored to running condition. Former city dwellers begin collective farms in the surrounding countryside, often joining forces with existing communities. But the authors also outline new technologies with the potential to replace the vanished fossil fuels. One major subplot revolves around an experimental project drawing energy from satellites that convert solar power into microwave beams. An electrical railgun offers the potential to insert new satellites into orbit without rocketry. The book ends with the hope that a new, more balanced society will emerge from the ashes of the old.

Anderson and Beason present all this in a fast-paced narrative that never loses momentum. One of the benefits of the large cast of characters is that it gives the authors the ability to change from one plot line to another, so that some sort of action is always in the center ring. And they manage to keep the tension from slacking off, even after the initial disaster has played out and the story has settled down into a fairly conventional post-holocaust mold, familiar from dozens of SF novels from three decades ago.

The book is not without its weaknesses. Too many of the characters (especially the villains) are stereotypes, with only a few minor touches to individualize them. And the plotting tends to fall into a fairly predictable good guys-bad guys pattern, with the dealing out of poetic justice a main focus. (The few good guys who get killed off are generally granted heroic deaths, while the bad guys die nastily.) And nobody is likely to remember this book for the quality of the prose. Then again, nobody is likely to pick up this kind of book looking for finely honed, memorable prose. It tells a strong story, with an effective focus on a genuine issue (the need for non-petroleum energy sources) that society is eventually going to have to face. And it is almost impossible to stop reading once you've started.

In short, *Ill Wind* is a lot of fun, and a stimulus to thought about important questions—exactly the qualities the best SF has always offered. It would be nice to see it sell huge numbers of copies, and the authors should go on to become household names. But it would also be nice to see this kind of book being published as science fiction, which by all the definitions of the genre it really is. ●

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SEPTEMBER 1995

15-17—**MosCon.** For info, write: **Box 9622, Moscow ID 83843**. Or phone: **(208) 882-3672** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). Con will be held in: Pullman WA (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Quality Inn. Guests will include: author Mel Gilden, artist Phil Foglio. New hotel this year.

15-17—**RavenCon. (804) 750-1902**. Sheraton Park So., Richmond VA. Will Shetterly, Emma Bull. Comics/gaming.

22-24—**Arcana. (612) 825-8256**. Holiday Inn Bandana Sq., St. Paul MN. Chelsea Quinn Yarbro. Strictly horror.

22-24—**StarCon. (800) 733-8735** or **(303) 671-0302**. Denver CO. A commercial Star Trek & fantasy media event.

22-24—**Festival of Fantastic Films. (0161) 707-3747**. Sachas Hotel, Manchester UK. Filmmaker R. Corman.

22-24—**CogCon. Miner Recreation Bldg., 10th & Hwy. 63, Rolla MO.** "Close Encounters of the Gaming Kind."

23-24—**LanternCon. (701) 235-2562**. Civic Center, 601 Sweet St., Bismarck ND. Comics, cards, records, etc.

28-Oct. 1—**Rising Star, 545 Howard Dr., Salem VA 24153. (703) 389-9400**. Glenvar VA High School. Fred Pohl.

28-Oct. 1—**BoucherCon, 14 Broad St., Nottingham NG1 3AL, UK. (011 44)** 602-526-600. World mystery con.

28-Oct. 1—**AndCon, Box 1740, Renton WA 98057. (800) 529-3976**. Toledo OH. Play-by-mail, etc., gaming meet.

29-Oct. 1—**ConClave, Box 2915, Ann Arbor MI 48106. (313) 291-9556**. Holiday Inn South, Lansing MI. Tim Zahn.

29-Oct. 1—**DreamCon, 10121 Evergreen Way #103, Everett WA 98204. (206) 742-8943**. Holiday Inn. Tad Williams.

29-Oct. 1—**SilverCon, Box 95941, Las Vegas NV 89193. (702) 896-6338**. Mardi Gras Inn. R. Zelazny, Bob Tucker.

29-Oct. 1—**ConChord, 13261 Donegal, Garden Grove CA 92644. (714) 530-3546**. Airtel, Van Nuys CA. SF Folksing.

29-Oct. 1—**Midnight at St. Gregory's, 12647 E. 27th, Tulsa OK 74129. (918) 437-2402**. Shawnee OK. A live game.

OCTOBER 1995

6-8—**ArmadilloCon, Box 9612, Austin TX 78766. (512) 339-0673**. Red Lion. Jablokov, DiFate, Bisson, D./L. Smith.

6-8—**BanffCon, Box 20001, Bow Valley PO, Calgary AB T2P 4H3. (403) 283-7367**. Park Lodge, Banff AB. Pratchett.

6-8—**First Contact, Box 92726, Milwaukee WI 53202**. Grand Milwaukee Hotel. M. Greenberg, R. Ruppel, W. Roper.

6-8—**ConText, Box 163391, Columbus OH 43216. (614) 889-0436**. Days Inn N. Hal Clement, M. Resnick. Written SF.

6-8—**RoboCon, Box 3206, Anaheim CA 92803**. Celebrating the 10th anniversary of Robotech. No more, at press.

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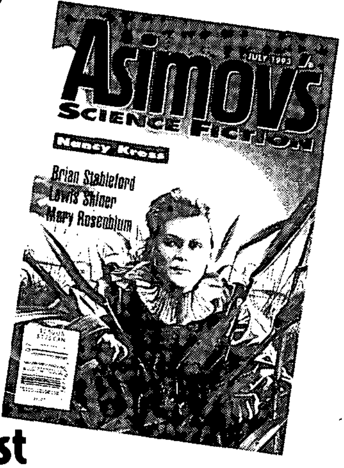
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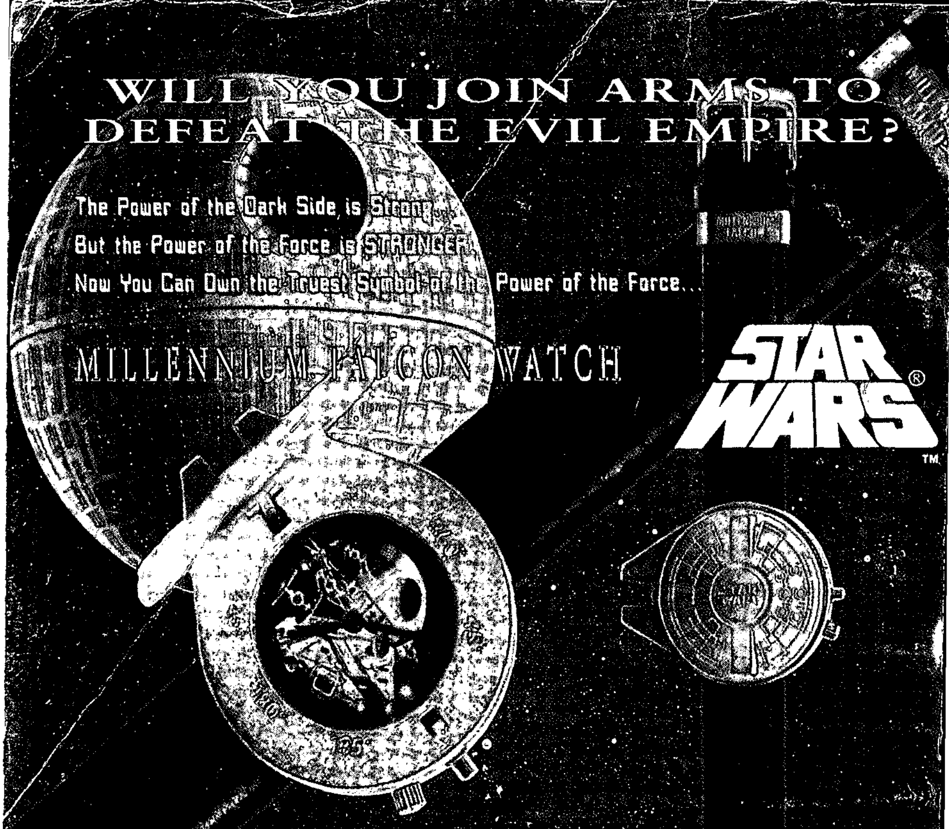

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